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VO

IN CAPTIVITY

by VINCENT BROWN

Elsie Brandt.
May 1909.

Brown
NCW

TWO IN CAPTIVITY

By the Same Author:

MY BROTHER.

ORDEAL BY COMPASSION.

Two in Captivity

BY

VINCENT BROWN

JOHN LANE: THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON AND NEW YORK
1899

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BOOK I

❦

THE WOMAN

Two in Captivity

I

LORD BIR on an afternoon in June tried to kill his friend Lewis Krehl.

Now, in the accounts of men, Krehl was no coward. If, when the bullet sang among the roses, Lady Bir had called on him to save himself, it may be that he would not have stirred from the terrace. But Lady Bir did not speak: she seemed for the moment not to comprehend that this murderous thing had been done; and Krehl, the instinct of self-preservation flaming within him, fled.

He fled into the wood: Bir being a house in a wood, in the swollen deep heart of it; and Lord Bir fired a second time — and as he tried to kill, he had nothing to say, but stood before the open

window out of which he had walked, less than sober, his face rather less than human.

At the third shot his wife in an abject terror flung herself upon him.

"He is innocent!" she cried; "we are innocent!"

But Lord Bir struck her in the face and called her the name of infamy.

For the blow she cared nothing. It was not the first, and physical pain was a relief. The infamous name took possession of her blood like an ineradicable slow poison.

Krehl, having got beyond the undergrowths into the wood, neither saw nor heard these things. Bits of bark and dried twigs crackled under his feet, and occasionally he sank in leaf-mould and had a sensation as of going through the earth.

He was not more than half an hour in finding his way out of the wood; but the impression upon him was of immeasurable time. It seemed to him that he had been pitched up violently to the doors of space.

He felt utterly defenceless and vaguely

sorry when, on getting at length out of the verdurous gloom, he found himself in a deserted country road scarred with cart-ruts and rabbit-holes. Living creatures were about, but he did not see them. His mind had become a blank. He walked automatically, like a man who had fallen asleep and been wakened by a thunder-clap.

Knowing not at all where he was going, he stumbled across a fallow field, then began to drift along a lovers' lane between bright green hedges garlanded with honey-suckle. He was bareheaded; his dark-gray clothes were of a fragile summer texture.

Some degree of mental lucidity dawned upon him presently, and with it a fierce intensity of feeling. He saw himself il-lumed in an odious light. The realisation of his ignominious panic became so vivid that it seemed to burst out before him tangibly and bluster in his face. So real was the thing, he even raised his hands

to strike at it. His spirit grew assertive and arrogant.

And then yet another mood fell on him, — the mood of a man who having made his own gods, with himself seated on the highest and most brilliant throne of all, persists in believing in them, in swearing by them, even while forced to contemplate their overthrow.

A little crimson flower was set in the grass at his feet, and he stopped to look at it, fascinated. It seemed to typify himself, — a gleam of genius in a monotonous and insensate world. He turned from it with a sigh; and gathering a spray of honeysuckle from the hedge, went on. He lifted the flower to his button-hole, but changed his mind while in the act of placing it there, and strolled forward carrying it in his hand.

He had just been face to face with a tremendous reality, — the experience that made Brutus roar and run. But already his disordered imagination was sweeping

him to the opposite extreme, and all things were becoming uncertain.

There stood, however, in the midst of this cloud of would-be and might-be, one commanding and indomitable verity — the man whose life had been in jeopardy in a beautiful garden of roses; the man who had played the poltroon without a touch of distinction in the manner of it; the man who could still hear with nerve-torturing distinctness the breaking of twigs and bark underfoot as he fled.

He pictured all the shameful thing. He knew that it was true; knew that he was plastered from head to foot with ignominy. Yet he would not have it so in frank admission.

And he asked himself: "Am I then a coward? — a coward?" And he answered the question by calling his conscience a liar. "I am no coward! I am incapable of moral cowardice!" he shouted aloud with uplifted face and ecstatic staring eyes.

And after that, in the treacherous com-

pany of a diseased self-consciousness and a morbid gossamer sensibility, he set forth on a voyage of discovery through the disturbed and pathless wilderness of his ego, examining and cross-examining himself as he went, but finding no rock of shelter in that weary land.

But — for dear vanity's sake — excuse himself he must.

He had acted on impulse; and were not all the impulses of the natural man ignoble? Brute beasts might scream and struggle in the meshes of the inevitable (Krehl dearly loved that blessed word of the weak), but they were caught and overwhelmed all the same: the sooner, indeed, because of their struggling. But the higher a man rose above the ape within him, the more conscious and deliberate of aspiration he became, the better he understood the value of subtle methods and the strength of philosophic non-resistance. The wind was a brutal senseless force, and the lily, being perfect, bent before its blast.

Lofty spirits lived in an atmosphere of apparent weakness, and yet had within them that which was invulnerable, that which could not be marred by accident or by demonstrations of mere physical brutality.

Was it not so?

A seemingly base action might not really be base, but in the last analysis heroic, if regarded from a high enough standpoint.

Was it not so?

Any swinish fool might deface a beautiful thing! But wisdom said, "Keep the beautiful thing out of the swinish fool's way." And what more — what worse than this had he done?

II

He was startled, on going round a bend in the lane, to find that he was not alone in it. A woman and a child were advancing to meet him. They came hand in hand, fast and anxious of movement. The woman was homespun and clean, with a placid kind face and the eyes of one of the resigned. She was Wimpress, the old housekeeper at poverty-struck desolate Bir. The little girl, a blue and white delight for tired eyes, was Lord and Lady Bir's only child.

"You seem to be in a hurry, Wimpress," Krehl said, standing before them.

"We want to be home before the storm comes," said she.

Krehl's glance wandered upon the great vaporous confusion overhead.

"The storm," said he. "Is there to be a storm?"

"I am sure of it, sir; I can smell the thunder brewing."

Krehl bent a knee on the grass; his arm went round the child, and he kissed her and fastened the honeysuckle in her frock. The little girl kissed him again of her own accord, and that made him close his eyes and bow his head before her, till there came a swelling in Wimpress's throat.

"You must always love your dear mother, Annetta," he said; and there was a third kiss, and Krehl rose somewhat hastily.

He gave Wimpress a gift with a felicity in the doing of it that pleased and flattered that simple soul.

"Many thanks for your kindness to me at Bir," he said.

Wimpress's eyes wore an inquiring sympathy. Was he going away? Had there been a quarrel — at last? Indefinite grief

and anxiety moved her to speak; but she feared to say the painful word. She had conceived a sincere liking — not a high regard, but a personal attachment — for this considerate, gentle, pleasant-mannered man, who always wore such pretty neck-ties, and was so backward in giving offence, even to the servants, and looked so pale and thoughtful and sad, as if he had met with a love hindrance long ago and been haunted by the sorrowful shadow of it ever since. Her eyes passed over his light brown hair (which was rather scant at the top of his head), and she marvelled, seeing it twitching in the sulphurous warm wind, why he was walking out without his hat. But it could hardly be that trouble had come, he looked so heedless and self-possessed. Moreover, he had peculiar ways, and that also kept Wimpress from asking questions.

Nevertheless, "You 'll not catch cold, I hope, sir," said she, meaning well.

"Oh, no," he answered, almost gaily.

And he left her abruptly, yet with no manner of annoyance.

He walked rapidly now, till coming to a cottage in a garden, where the wife of the gardener at Bir stood in a solid posture, her arms clasped under her apron, — "I see your ducks have been making the pond muddy, Mrs. Geer," said he, addressing her over the hedge.

"It 's not the ducks, sir; we don't keep them. It 's the weather. Always when the water grows that thundery colour, never having been stirred, then there 's sure to be a storm."

"Indeed," Krehl said deferentially. And, gazing beyond her across the garden: "How far am I from the railway station?" he asked.

"Four miles by the short way through the woods, sir. But on the high-road it must be six, or more."

"Oh, as far as that? I 'm afraid I should n't be able to find my way through the woods. Do you think Geer would be

good enough to show me part of the way?"

"He'll be most pleased, sir. But he's not come home to his tea yet. If you'll step indoors and wait, it may save you from catching cold."

Krehl had not been many minutes in the gardener's sitting-room when Geer came. His wife went out to meet him, and the pair talked in the passage.

"Well, it's come at last!" Geer blurted out. "It's been coming this long while, and now you women folk will be up to your ears in scandal."

"What scandal, Stephen?"

"Oh, them two! A fine pair! One's as bad's the other, in my opinion; but if there's choice of the worst, it's him, who ought to have known she was another man's wife and left the house. The wonder is murder has n't come of it — though it was as near that as the twinkle of an eye."

"Stephen — what's happened?"

"Murder nearly done!" said Geer. "Lord Bir this afternoon, creeping out at a window, caught them together on the terrace, and fired I don't know how many times at Mr. Krehl with his revolver. I heard the shots in the kitchen garden. How he ever got off with a whole skin is a miracle."

"Stephen! —"

"Well, I've told you how it would be! From the way they've been carrying on, you'd think Lord Bir was deaf and blind. But he's not blind yet, nor deaf neither. So this is what it has come to! He's been hatching it in his mind and watching them all along."

"I'm almost in a faint, Stephen. But don't speak so loud — he's in there."

"Who?"

"Mr. Krehl."

"What for?"

"He wants you to show him the near way to the station."

"Does he though!"

"I thought it queer — him without his hat on his head or any luggage," Mrs. Geer whispered.

"He ran away!"

"Mercy — if he was to be murdered, so anybody would run away. I've promised you 'll direct him to the station."

"I 'll not do it! More than my place is worth if Lord Bir was to know. He 'll have to find the road for himself, now he 's got as far as this."

"But Lord Bir may be after him with his revolver!"

"No, he 's not. He 's at Bir. He 's locked my lady up in the red room in the north wing —"

"Stephen! and her so frightened of the Dark Stair!"

"She should have thought of that before. And he 's took himself to the north wing to watch her. He 's in that room with his grandfather's picture. He 's raving mad, they say. One of the maids saw the mark on her face where he struck her."

"Shame! His own wife!"

"A precious sort of wife!"

"Ssh, Stephen — the sitting-room door is on the jar —"

Krehl came out. He moved down the passage, regarding neither Geer nor his wife. His mouth was slightly open; he was like a man panting for air.

"Will Stephen go with you, sir?" Mrs. Geer asked timidly.

"No, thank you — I will go alone."

"But the rain's begun to fall, sir," the pitiful woman said; "and you've nothing on your head."

Krehl made her no answer. He slid down the garden path in the manner of a sensitive thief forgiven. He snatched at the gate with both hands, and went out on to the high-road.

III

SOON the storm flew at him. His hair was washed flat to his head; rain streamed on his face, his neck; he was soaked to the skin. But he walked still — on and on, bodily discomfort apparently a trifling matter to him. The storm indeed seemed a thing apart, an excrescence stupid and gross: the fugitive remaining complete in himself, in his spiritual travail and imaginative possibility.

His steps were at first light and rapid, but gradually became slow, laborious, wholly lacking in buoyancy, and he groped forward at random, with stooping shoulders and feebly swaying arms.

And the night fell black upon him, and he grew footsore and heavy under his load of rain. His boots began to stick about his

feet like pulp; he had an idea that he was barefooted; the water concentrated at his knees, this annoying and depressing him more than the fierce torrents in his face. He kept muttering to himself, and every now and then lifted his hand to his head.

He flitted past wayside cottages: perceived some, was oblivious of others. Drenched wayfarers loomed unnaturally in the torn ragged night, making a kind of hissing sound as they swirled homeward in the wind. But for these Krehl had no word of greeting: he resented their presence and still more their cheery cries of "Good-night!"

His mental state alternated between partial and absolute blankness and abnormal activity. At times the torch of memory set his brain on fire, and his comprehension became extraordinarily clear; and this hectic flame dying out was succeeded by long periods of depression, of inability to grasp the fact of his own

existence, of heart-stopping terror, as if the annihilation of all things were at hand.

In the third hour of flight he had become so light-headed that he imagined himself as wrestling with wild beasts in a closely confined space.

Once he fell forward heavily in the mud, and getting on all-fours remained in that posture, the gale shrieking over him. And yet, even while grovelling thus before the ruthless forces of nature, he felt not debased, not animalised, but unconquerable. For the martyr passion had got alight within him and was beginning to burn.

"I will save you, Kate!" he cried aloud; "I will declare your innocence to the world, if it be with my last breath!"

And saying this, he wrapped himself in a profound and poignant self-compassion, through which a sense of injustice, of cruel wrong and ill-fate, cut like a fiery blade.

For when you are in a fair garden and all the flowers are fresh and fragrant, and birds sing and the air is sweet and pure, you do not desire violence to befall, but would have the garden remain as it is, with no night there, and no storm, and no ugly serpent of discord lurking among the flowers.

He got up and showed his face to wind and rain again. "If Kate could know what I am suffering for her sake!" He was honeycombed with sophistry.

In the court of conscience he pleaded not guilty and extenuation in the same breath. His own emotional instability was the last thing he dreamed of. He fancied himself as having the ear of the world and declaring Lady Bir's innocence till the world believed, — not because he could show white hands, or open the door of his heart and reveal all cleanness there, but because he, Lewis Krehl, declared it sacrificially from the martyr's stake.

He was conscious by and by of being

in a forest. But he had no recollection of having entered it. On a sudden he stumbled headlong into the low-hanging branches of a fir. The tree shook off its rain mantle upon him, and some wild fowl took wing.

As he fell, so he lay, his face in the wet soil, his right arm doubled up under his chest. He had a notion that his face was bleeding, and he hoped at least that this was so, since there was heroism in the shedding of blood for the woman of his love.

But it seemed to him that Lord Bir could see him lying there with his face in the mire. Was this a mocking laugh on the wings of the wind?

And then came an outbreak of extreme, almost convulsive irritability; and after this he swooned into the lotus-peace of egoism, and imagined his own death — a very touching and impressive death, and noble too, for his last words were: "Lady Bir has done no wrong." And he beheld his

own corpse, a beautiful and dignified corpse, with ineffable distinguished smile and hands drawn up upon the breast like the hands of a marble saint on a cathedral tomb.

But in a surcharge of fear lest he should truly be dying, he scrambled out of the fir branches and went on through the forest. He must not, he told himself, perish till he had proclaimed Kate's innocence. And from that moment he held fixedly to the purpose of making his way back to Bir.

"If I don't go back after what has happened, he will say I ran away!—"

His head struck against a tree, making a broad wound from which blood flowed. He rubbed the blood over his forehead with his hand, smiling strangely.

"Bir," he thought, "shall be made to understand that I am no coward."

Not by sane guidance, by chance rather, he reached at length a confine of the forest, and saw what appeared to be a

huge black garment spread out upon the turbulent drear horizon. This was a moor, and on the edge of it, near the wood, a man was standing with a dead lamb hung in his elbow.

IV

THE man was a shepherd, a humble ignorant fellow. Nevertheless Krehl in the distraction of his senses regarded him as dangerous.

"You're out late, sir."

"I think I must have lost my way," Krehl said.

He looked here and there, — back to the trees, across the moor.

"I have had a bout with the adversary," he added; the shepherd not hearing now for the wind.

"Your hat's gone too."

"Yes — that was the storm, of course." Krehl turned, so that the stranger had sight merely of his half face. "I am anxious to get back to — " If he finished the sentence the shepherd failed to hear.

"Where, sir?"

"Burpham."

He had never been to Burpham and knew no one there. He thought this concealment very clever. He was always fancying himself as saying and doing clever things.

He complained incoherently of his head. He staggered, and the shepherd steadied him.

"You are dead tired, sir."

"I am quite well, thank you! I set out for a walk. The evening was beautiful; I gathered honeysuckle. Wimpress warned me. Then the storm came and I was caught in the night. Now — I want to get back."

"Burpham?"

"Yes." He glanced at the man suspiciously. "How far is it from here?"

"Burpham?"

"Yes!" Krehl said sullenly.

"Seven or eight mile."

"And — Bir?"

"Three or four."

"I should pass Bir on my way to Burpham?"

"You could if you went that way. It 's a lonesome bad road."

Krehl, plucking himself out of a muse, said, "You seem to doubt my word?"

"No. Why should I? Nothing to me where you want to be."

"Quite so," Krehl said. "I beg your pardon. I am not myself to-night. It will never be the same after this. Things happen — then you find yourself in a new world, controlled by strange forces." He sighed. "If you will be so good as to show me the way, I will reward you."

The shepherd hesitated.

"I never go to Burpham," said he.

"You have reasons?"

"I 've promised never to go there again."

"Oh. Then I must go alone."

"My mother would wonder where I had gone. It would be worse to-night. Always when there 's thunder she sits up with her

book. But if you 'll come to our house I 'll ask her. We live by ourselves on Hellingby Common. My name is Richard Eade."

"Richard Eade," Krehl repeated. The name got in among his delusions and seemed to penetrate the future.

He took his companion's arm; and they went across the moor.

"You are not married, then?"

"No, sir; but I ought to have been." The shepherd said this impulsively, and returned to silence.

But shortly after he laid open his heart; telling of how it had been a case of the woman in one scale, the mother in the other, the mother's threat of ending her days in the workhouse weighing down the son's love. The woman had a husband now, and children; she lived at Burpham. Krehl felt himself before a curtain that might rise on a tragedy.

The skies were less of a tangle, the moon being nearer freedom and the wind grown

more reasonable, when they got to the house on the Common. Richard Eade opened the door with caution, and beckoned Krehl to follow him.

The kitchen had a big bedstead; on the hob, by a smouldering fire, stood a jug covered with a smoky plate. The shepherd lighted a candle, and poured out Krehl a cup of cocoa from the jug. Then he took up the candle and stepped silently to an inner door, which having opened, he held up the light close to the ceiling.

Krehl looked over his shoulder, and saw a white-haired strong-featured old woman asleep in a chair, a big book open on her lap. She was fully dressed, as if in readiness for a journey.

"She 's fell asleep reading her chapter in the thunder," her son whispered. "I 'll wake her. Mother!"

Krehl drew back.

"Here 's a visitor come to see you," said Richard Eade.

The old woman, carrying a huge Bible

against her bosom, stalked into the kitchen like a female Moses bearing the Tables of the Law. She had made herself white and gaunt in the austerities of religion. She halted in an attitude of surprising dignity on seeing Krehl.

"I thought it might be Liza," she said, breathing hard.

"You know I'd not do it, mother," Richard Eade muttered. "I've promised —" He glanced shamefaced at Krehl. "This gentleman wants to get to Burpham to-night."

The old woman turned her eyes on Krehl, and he knew that she searched him from head to foot.

"My son never goes to Burpham."

"He only asks me to go as far as Bir," the shepherd said.

"I won't let him go farther," Krehl said. He put a sovereign on the table.

"You're welcome to the money, mother."

Eade took it up and gave it to her.

She looked at it, and then at Krehl. He judged that she thought no good of him.

"I 'll sit up for you," she said to her son; and went back to her room, shutting the door.

Krehl drank more cocoa, and Richard Eade found him an old cap to wear. Then the candle was blown out, and they left the cottage.

The clearance had been going on overhead, and objects could be seen at a distance. Their talk was of land, flocks, and other plain matters.

The shepherd left Krehl at the lodge gates, not asking for the return of his cap. The lodge, like most things about ruined Bir, was fallen into neglect, and the gates stood open.

Krehl made his way under the dripping trees to the house.

V

FROM a window high in the north wing a light touched feebly the disorganised night. Krehl stood in the garden gazing up at this. It came, he knew, from the red room. All the rest of the old house, so far as he could make out, was in darkness.

The first hour of the morning had begun to dwindle before he gave up his watching position and went on to the end of the north wing.

Here he regarded curiously a somewhat unsightly structure affixed at a sharp angle across the entire extent of the gable. The thing was made of wood and iron, and it had gloomy fame as the Dark Stair of Bir. A stranger, catching vagrant glimpses of it through the trees, might have mistaken it for an enormous flue.

The foot of the stair was sunk in a mound of willows and undergrowths. The upper end opened to the sky, some sixty feet above the ground. It was believed to be unsafe and known to be haunted.

The grisly story ran (touching the fourth Lord Bir — a magnificent and resourceful sinner), that he, having commanded the Dark Stair to be set up for wholly unrighteous purposes, had in the extremity of his time flung himself from it into Tophet. And a lord, perishing graphically thus, had of course fertilised the rural mind with the supernatural. So the old reprobate's ghost had flaunted hither and thither on the Dark Stair ever after.

Krehl, aware of there being somewhere a door that opened from the stair into the north wing, felt his way up till he came to it. The door was shut, but unlocked; and with a little difficulty he got it open, stepped in warily, and pulled it to behind him. He was like a man travailing for his

life — in black darkness now and silence absolute.

Of his whereabouts he could have no certainty. But he supposed, from the steps he had taken on the stair, that he was in the third storey; the red room being in the fourth. Guiding himself by keeping his hand on the wall, he moved noiseless over the bare floor, till it seemed to him suddenly that a great mass of timber was crashing about his ears. Yet nothing touched him.

And then, perhaps ten yards distant, there fell a yellow shine, first on the floor, then across stair railings on to the opposite wall; and Krehl standing motionless strained his senses of hearing and sight. The light grew stronger, enabling him to perceive that he was in a long, high, empty corridor.

Then Lord Bir appeared. He carried a lamp, and plainly was not sober. Lord Bir crossed the corridor, and leaning on the rail peered down a flight of stone steps.

"Who's there?" he demanded. "Who's that prowling about?"

A moment's silence. Lord Bir went on cursing; his curses chased each other with explosions and reverberations up and down the corridor. The lamp meantime swayed over his head, the globe blackening with smoke.

He was an old-young man, of powerful build, with a tendency to obesity: a man of huge undisciplined animalism, of sinister fierce lusts; the sort of man who would fight and gore and do detestable things for the female of his desire. He had ripened early and been accounted handsome in the days before the backwash of unrestrained appetites deluged him. Now he was a chaos of virility burning out.

"Who's there?" he roared again. "Is that you, Wimpress? By God, you old slut! — Is that you? — I'll see if you won't answer!"

In a whirlwind of profanity he began to

descend the steps leading to the second storey.

This gave Krehl his opportunity. Going along to the door from which Lord Bir had emerged, he stole in, finding himself in a large room, cold as an icehouse, with pompous furniture standing about in disorder, faintly illumined by firelight.

The firelight came from an inner room, which Krehl entered.

VI

THE place reeked of tobacco smoke and alcoholic fumes. The defiled air affected Krehl's throat; he held his hand to his mouth, smothering a fit of coughing. The room was quite small, and stank like a low public-house.

Krehl looked about. The carpet, old and greasy, matched the ceiling, which was black as a stoke-hole. Dusky tapestry draped parts of the walls, and the parts left bare wore a sombrous coat of age and grime. On the hearth lay a newspaper and a book: these appeared to have been thrown down hastily. There were two arm-chairs, in rough leather, much worn; a couch in damask of faded blue; a big oak table devoid of cloth and having on it a bottle, tumbler, knife-corkscrew, meer-

schaum pipe (stained black), and an ash-tray: this last a heathenish mad thing made out of a leering nude woman and a devil in convulsions of laughter. All these odds and ends of carnal comfort Krehl noted as if they were to him of vital import.

And he said to himself: "If I should ever chance upon that shepherd again, I shall say to him, 'I never saw you in my life before!'"

Nor had he clear understanding why so gratuitous and singular a resolve should form in his mind. It was his habit to forbid himself things before being tempted; that is why he so often yielded. He was always turning his conscience out of doors into the cold, only to call it back again presently after, for pity's sake; and each time it came whimpering home more limp and palsied than before.

He had stolen into this shabby den wearing the shepherd's cap. But now he snatched it from his head and cast about for some hole or corner wherein to hide

it. He pulled aside the tapestry, glanced under the table, the chairs, the couch, but failed to mark a place where the cap might be concealed. Lifting at last the fender at one end, he pushed it under, and a knowing expression brooded on his face, as though he were congratulating himself on an extremely ingenious device.

He sat on a chair, and having regarded the fender a few moments, thrust at it with his foot. The cap was disclosed. Krehl instantly picked it up, crammed it into his pocket, and his eyes were turned apprehensively to the door.

He next tried the window, vainly: made an effort to pull up the carpet, though this was so firmly nailed he could not get out a corner. Thereafter he got on his knees before the fire, and pushed the cap up the chimney. Then he stood to watch. It did not come down, and he felt relieved indefinitely.

This done, he helped himself to a little brandy and water: the spirit arrested some-

what the nervous waste going on within him; and he drank again.

Then, leaning on the table for support, he began another observation of the room. Over the mantelshelf was a portrait of the Viscount Bir who in the end of his sinning had wormed his way too far up the Dark Stair. This had been the depraved old man's favourite lair; incredible whispers of his doings had been transmitted. And now it found favour in his grandson's eyes.

Krehl, approaching the portrait, caught sight of shining steel at one end of the chimneypiece. It was a revolver — the weapon with which Bir had thought to kill him on the terrace.

He heard again the bullets sing: wondered where they had gone. He took up the revolver and examined it meditatively. It was now fully charged. He drew a deep breath through his nostrils.

He was still holding it in his hand, a queer grimace across the lower part of

his face, when the door opening on to the corridor was banged, and a fall of footsteps sounded from the next room.

Krehl thrust the revolver into his pocket. Going round the table, he posted himself behind the couch.

The couch was little more than a couple of feet from the wall, opposite the fire-place, and Krehl was standing there when Lord Bir made clamorous entry. He did not see Krehl, and was without suspicion that his hiding-place had been invaded. He had brought the lamp back with him, and set it on the table, turning it up. Krehl, motionless and silent in the smoke against the tapestry, looked more like a disembodied presence than a man of flesh and blood.

Lord Bir began to mumble to himself; and Krehl's hand went to his pocket, grasping the revolver. He did nothing. But he could not cast forth this horrid thought. So he played with it: dreamed over it. All his troubles, Kate's impending dis-

honour, seemed to be clearing away. This was a secluded part of the house; the servants were abed; only the trees stood sentinel; where was the eye to see? And the Dark Stair was near at hand; and as he had come, through the night unobserved, so he might go, none knowing he had been there.

The Dark Stair! you climbed and climbed, and it grew darker and darker, he remembered. . . .

On a sudden he sickened before the poisonous breath of temptation. His hold on the revolver relaxed. The martyr mood welled up within him, sprinkling golden showers upon the heroic way. And he would rather be in the heroic way: it might the sooner end; but in it one gathered up for sublime expression all the fine things in one's soul.

Lord Bir, seated before the fire, drank raw spirits. Taking up the book, he sprawled his great legs over the fender. The fire had fallen low, and he rammed at

the embers savagely with a walking-stick, scattering them over the fireplace; and throwing on more fuel, not a spark was left visible. This put him in a rage, and he used the walking-stick again, and swore oaths thick and foul as the smoke crawling up the chimney. Finally he stopped swearing; and having made himself more drunken, huddled deep in his chair.

But not to read; he flung down the book. As it fell on the floor, Krehl's every nerve jerked, and as it seemed to him, screamed out, and his back struck against the wall. Then he sank behind the couch in physical collapse.

And soon after both men were asleep.

VII

KREHL, waking from an uneasy bed, heard muffled sounds, as from a far distance, and lay listening. He was conscious that some one moved — somewhere — and that the room was in darkness. While changing his posture on the floor, his hip was hurt by pressure of the revolver, and his mind became more active. He hoisted himself on his knees, clutching at the back of the couch.

The fire was gone out and the room grown rank. It gave Krehl the impression of a pit into which dead men had been dragged. On his right was a sheet of pallid gray — the dawn; on his left, on the floor and on the wall, lay scraps of brighter light cast in from the next room.

Krehl, keeping on his knees, scarce caring what had happened, what might be

happening, bent his head over the couch. His thoughts were of himself and of Kate, and they concerned the future rather than the present.

There was something for him to do, and it was pleasant to think of that and not do it. Inaction was to him a soothing pillow, and he shrank from giving it up, yet knowing that his alone must be the hand to pull it away. The sense of isolation, of injustice, oppressed him. He wondered if there was anybody in the world besides Kate who really understood him or would wear a sad eye on the day of his death.

For in this progression of pain, as the goal and catastrophe of it, violence there must be. If there was another way, he could not see it. Nevertheless he regarded himself as indestructible, and Kate as indestructible, his mind revolting from the idea of absolute and irrevocable alienation.

He stood up, shook himself, and let his hand go over the revolver from the outside

of his coat. He went to the door and looked into the next room.

Lord Bir was there; he had fallen and was just getting up. The lamp was on a chair, and Lord Bir took hold of it and made for the farther door. Krehl followed him, but without decision, without intention even.

Lord Bir blundered along the corridor in the direction of the red room. He was going to his wife, then!

The storm without had passed; the wind was in subjection; the beginnings of day were at the high corridor windows; but for the shuffle, shuffle, of Lord Bir's feet the silence would have been profound.

Krehl dogged the drunken man's steps.

Lord Bir staggered often, and the lamp plunged this way and that. If it should go out, they would be together in the corridor in the dark. . . .

Krehl took the revolver from his pocket. But it hung by his side, and his grasp on it was feeble.

It seemed improbable that Lord Bir could reach the red room without mishap. He was carrying the lamp with utter recklessness, — now close to his face, now against his shoulder, now down to his thigh, then up again abruptly to his face, then above his head in a slanting position, the light falling behind him rather than before. He muttered to himself and laughed saturninely. And Krehl, drawing unconsciously nearer to him, seemed to find a new motive for holding on to life. He imagined himself as an avenger: dreamed of ridding the earth of all its foulness by one resolute splendid act. But he did nothing; his will fluttered like a bird in a net.

Lord Bir wheeled out of sight with amazing abruptness.

When Krehl next saw him he was lumbering up a stone stairway, steep, narrow, and without a hand-rail. It led to the red room; and Krehl did not go up. Lord Bir, ascending laboriously, looked like

some huge croaking raven. Any moment he might come crashing down. But he reached the top at last, and disappeared.

Krehl remained in the darkness at the foot of the stair. The blood which had dried on his brow, melted again with sweat. He returned the revolver to his pocket, knowing now how he should use it. That was his fate, and he could not escape it, must not seek to escape it, lest his life should be rounded off with a more awful imperfection.

Sounds of violence came from the red room.

"Open the door!"

The door was kicked, and Bir the foul-mouthed let himself go. The darkness reverberated with blasphemous threats. Yet not even then was Krehl tempted to impatience. For the one noble way of handling this monstrous fortune had been revealed to him.

The door of the red room was opened, and shut.

VIII

THERE was more of the dawn by half an hour when Lord Bir staggered into his reeking lair, head down, a hangdog shagginess about him.

Krehl was at one end of the hearth, making no attempt to conceal himself. An armchair was between the two men, as they stood silent a moment looking in each other's eyes. Lord Bir's countenance expressed surprised contempt: Krehl's, a strangely gentle pathetic resignation.

"So you 've come back."

The remark was neither interrogative nor exclamatory.

"What 's in the wind now?"

And Krehl saying nothing—

"Damn you!" Lord Bir cried, "are you struck dumb like your paramour?" Then, perceiving that the revolver was gone, his

face grew black, his eyes terrible. He sobered more and more.

"Well! what are you doing here?—" And but for Krehl's moving away he would there and then have been at his throat.

Krehl took the revolver from his pocket, and the men faced each other from opposite sides of the table. Another taunt escaped Lord Bir. Then he stiffened with rage, shouting—

"How did you get in?"

"By the Dark Stair," Krehl replied.

"It was you I heard, then!"

Lord Bir pushed the lamp aside, and gripped at the table with both hands, his chest thrust forward in menace.

"No doubt you think to frighten me?"

"No."

"So you don't want to frighten me?"

"No."

"Well, I'll give you a chance!"

He presented his back to Krehl; his smile was very ugly.

"You are mistaken," Krehl said.

Lord Bir shut the door. He came back, removed the lamp on to the mantel-shelf, and returning to the table stood there as before. He was a shade paler; his eyes blazed mockery.

"You damned coward!"

"I am no coward," Krehl said, "in the sense you mean."

"So that's what you came to say? But these foppish intellectual airs won't take me in! I have your measure. If you came back thinking to settle this business — bah! — you really are a fool!"

He scrutinised Krehl insolently.

"You ran away! — bolted at the sight of gunpowder! And of course that would make her think heaps more of you! I daresay she regards you as a hero now!"

"My flight was involuntary," Krehl said.

"But it showed you in your true colours! A pistol-shot and off flew the fine peacock's feathers! Good God! a

woman to muddle herself up with a calf-man like that! — a fellow who can't stand his ground when there's a speck of danger about; then comes sneaking back in the dead of night by a secret stair!"

Lord Bir made the table shake in his wrath.

"Well, what's your dodge now? Or perhaps the rain did n't agree with you; it has washed out a bit of that namby-pamby prettiness, I see. Huh! She'd be delighted at the sight of you now. Why don't you ask me to take you to her? I've got her safe!"

He leaned farther across the table. His features were discoloured. A leprosy of malice was upon him.

"So you've stolen my revolver — for fear of getting a bullet in that spongy brain of yours! But does n't it occur to you that I may have another?"

"I have no fear of you," Krehl said; "and I do not mind how many revolvers you may have."

He held the weapon before him, his finger on the trigger, as though about to use it. He was incredibly self-possessed.

"You have been at my mercy to-night, Lord Bir, if I had desired to take your life. That was not my purpose. I have come back to proclaim your wife's innocence —"

Lord Bir laughed; his eyes measured the breadth of the table.

"So that's all — hey?"

"— to prove your wife's innocence," Krehl said. "You will not believe her; your heart is turned to stone. Yet I could have wished that you would accept my word of honour, without violence —"

The book had been placed by Krehl on the table, and Lord Bir took hold of it, gazing the while fixedly at Krehl.

"Go on! — go on!"

"I shall not shrink from this, for your wife's sake," Krehl said, in the manner of a dull-witted person repeating a lesson which had been learned with difficulty.

"I am in the grip of a relentless fate," he added, sophistical to the last. "Your wife, Lord Bir, is innocent."

Again he paused, shuddering on the threshold.

"But that's not all!" Bir suggested with eagerness. He shifted the book to his right hand. A suspicion of Krehl's intention was breaking in upon him, and it seemed at once credible and incredible. For Krehl's condition appeared to be that of complete physical obtuseness. It occurred to Lord Bir, from the insensibility of Krehl's appearance, that he had been stricken blind. He looked as if he would fall down dead at the table.

"Lord Bir, it is my intention to kill myself. That is why I have come back. I confess I have wavered in my purpose. It is not so now. I am strong again — I shall do this thing for her sake. I shall kill myself here — as you stand looking at me — so that you may hear my last words. You cannot drag

your wife before the world beside a dead man! —"

He fell silent again: seemed to stand in a desolate dream. He was in the agony of sacrifice; the chill of death began to fall upon him. He raised the revolver.

"There must be justice!" he cried in a triumphant loud voice. "I attest your wife's innocence with my life!"

He pointed the revolver to his head — and in the same instant Lord Bir flung the book in his face. The vehemence of the blow was such that it hurled Krehl against the wall. The tapestry for a moment was stretched taut: then it shook and undulated as Krehl fell to the floor.

Lord Bir strode round the table and picked up the revolver.

"Infernal idiot!" he said; and the words waved over Krehl's brain like a flag of truce.

This strange thing had shaken Lord Bir more than he would have confessed. He helped Krehl to his feet, and set him in a

chair. He threw water roughly in his face, meaning to be kind.

Krehl's eyes opened, closed again immediately; and so he remained, breathing scarce audibly, his countenance an expressionless mask.

IX

LORD BIR, rousing his besotted intellect, could make nothing of all this. It was beyond him: lacking imaginative sympathy, he was powerless to plumb the deeps of it; so he called it distemper of the mind, yet was not assured.

He stood regarding Krehl with contemptuous amazement and pity. And Krehl, presently returning to a clearer consciousness, motioned as if to take his hand.

"We ought to be friends now," said he. "All the fault was mine; I am very sorry. But I shall go away." His smile flickered out pathetically. "You believe in her innocence now, Bir?"

"No!"

The answer was instant, decisive. Krehl made as though to rise.

"But you cannot doubt —"

"I don't believe a word you've said! If I can be sure of anything, it is that you ought to be in a madhouse!"

Krehl hearing this, his features assumed something of the look they had worn before Lord Bir had disarmed him. He stood up, brushed with his hands the water from his face and clothes, and moved toward the door. Lord Bir was there in the same moment, and feigned to prevent him from opening it. Krehl, agitated, insisted on going.

"I am not your prisoner!" And having opened the door: "You tried to kill me yesterday," he said. "Do it now! —"

Lord Bir, a pace from him, marvelled greatly. This kind of thing defied his understanding. He ground his teeth, angered, as selfish dull men always are, in the presence of the incomprehensible.

"There's another way of dealing with you," he said.

"The other way is in my own hands," Krehl replied.

"What do you intend to be up to now?"

"You shall hear."

"But I want to know! I'm not going to be played with by a fellow like you. Just look," he added, curbing resentment, "at the miserable mess you're in. I tell you, I sha'n't let you go out!"

Go Krehl would, however.

He had crossed the large empty room and reached the corridor, when Lord Bir touched his shoulder. The touch was friendly, gentle even, for Bir. The lamp had been left behind, and the spiritual light of dawn was just enough to show each the other's face.

"Now don't be foolish, Krehl. Come back to my den and have a drink and a rest. That's what you want, you know. You can sleep there, if you like — I'll go to my room. Why, you're in a high fever, man, and not fit to go out. Damn! I

can't allow it, and won't. There'll be a row if you insist!"

Krehl removed the hand from his shoulder, and went along the corridor. Lord Bir was at his heels.

"You're mad — you're stark mad!" he cried.

And Krehl pausing answered, "No — all things have been made clear to me." He turned. "You need not threaten me, Lord Bir. I am not seeking my own safety. I am proving your wife's innocence. Yesterday, you say, I ran away —"

"Don't speak of that, you fool!"

"— I am here with you alone. You have a revolver; I am defenceless. We can barely see each other — but you can see enough. Lord Bir, I am no coward!"

That word was in his soul, through and through, and he would pluck it out.

"Well, we won't talk of that now. There'll be another chance. I don't intend to let you go out!"

Krehl faced him with deliberation.

"I will remain till daylight on one condition, — that you believe what I have said."

At this, "She 's an adulterous rag," Lord Bir cried, "and I mean to set her up as a gazing-stock!"

Krehl went on, faster than before. Getting to the door of the Dark Stair, he pulled it open, and disappeared on to the stair. Lord Bir could not see him, could not hear the slightest movement.

"Krehl! —"

"I am here."

Lord Bir stepped on to the stair.

"Blast you!" he shouted in a paroxysmal fit of passion. "If you don't come back, I 'll make you!"

He blocked Krehl's passage, seizing him by the arm. But Krehl shook him off, and Lord Bir, losing his balance, went crashing down the stair.

'X

KREHL listened. A moan: then silence. Krehl descended.

Lord Bir was lying at the foot of the stair, his head in mire. He was unconscious.

Krehl, one knee on a damp step, passed his hand over Lord Bir's body. If he was breathing, Krehl could not hear. He was being slowly suffocated. If he were lifted at once, his life might be saved. . . .

There was blood on his hair; his right arm was broken; the right leg seemed broken also. He was doubled up horribly. He would be dead — in a few minutes — if no help came.

"Lord Bir — "

The name was whispered. Krehl expected no answer, and there was none.

Yet he uttered again the name, like a man trying to steal a march on his conscience. And the moist morning wind drove the whisper back from the undergrowths into the Dark Stair.

Krehl began to ascend the stair.

When a little way up he stopped, and looking down, saw a thing lying there like a log.

And in the same moment he had a vision of Death, and the face of Death was like unto his own.

And the world seemed to shrink and roll away, leaving only the Dark Stair behind.

Krehl, suddenly turning, ran up the stair and entered the corridor.

XI

HE walked softly, gravely, into the red room, without knocking; a kind of meditative shamble in his gait. And Lady Bir, rising from a pitiless dream of sleep, stood by the sofa gazing upon him in silent amaze. It was as though she regarded him as the expression of some tremendous miracle.

"You have no fire," he remarked casually.

He looked irrelevant, from head to foot.

He did not say more at once. He had left the door wide open, and stood near it; and Lady Bir feared to question him, to speak, because of the miraculous something that had come in with him, chilling her blood.

And in the wonderment and silence he lifted up his arms, and she lifted up hers precisely in the same way.

"Kate," he said, "I have come to set you free."

And he let his arms fall, and she let hers fall. One intelligence, it seemed, governed both.

His dragging peculiar movement across the room to the window at which he had gazed from the garden unloosened her speech, and she asked him in staccato accents how he had got into the house.

"By the Dark Stair," he told her; and she repeated the words.

"There is nothing to fear," he added.

And with an air of indifference he took from a table a green bowl of curious make, moving it about in his hands in the manner of a man who did not know what to do with that absurd thing, time. Again he went to the window, drew aside the blind, and peered out at himself standing in the garden. We are always at the gates of paradise, he thought.

The room as to colour belied its name. It was quite small and rather squalid, but

not red at all. For light there were two wax candles on the chimneypiece; and the air was oppressive with the smell of drugs. An untouched meal was set out on a card-table. Krehl, taking up a knife, tapped it on a plate.

"Lewis — Lord Bir is in the north wing."

He smiled mysteriously, and going to the door shut it with some force.

"Lewis!"

"He won't hear," Krehl said; and returning to the table, he resumed examination of the green bowl. "I wonder how they get these lovely colours. I had a friend once, an artist in pottery, a hopeless drunkard. But he made beautiful things!" Krehl said exultantly. "Do you know, Kate, that is the only immortality, and — perhaps it is not worth having."

He turned the bowl this way and that, absorbed apparently in its modulations of hue.

"Work like this has character, you

know. Some of the tones rather strident. But in the total, strong." He held the bowl at arm's length, his head on one side.

"Lewis — what has happened?"

He looked at her, not lowering the piece of ware.

"Happened?" he said lightly.

"Yes, yes! Something has happened — "

"Oh, well, as for that," he said, "I 'll tell you in good time, Kate. There 's no hurry."

He carried the bowl close to the candlelight.

"I should like this," he observed. "Is it yours?"

And without waiting for her reply he launched out upon a rapid, incoherent analysis of its merits. And in the midst of an intricate wild phrase he pulled himself up and exclaimed, "How the yoke of anonymity galls!" and then, leaping out of vision-land: "I came back through the

storm," said he, quietly. "You see what I am like," he added, sighing.

Catching sight of a mirror, he left the green bowl on the mantelshelf and went to look at himself. He put back the hair from his forehead, and pressed his fingers down the bridge of his nose.

"I'm getting out of shape, it seems," he said. "That storm was a murderous business! I thought of going away. But a grand idea entered my mind. I will tell you some day. I'm all right now, you know. I never felt more sure of myself! — Kate, why don't you lie down and rest? You ought to be in bed. You need n't be so anxious!"

She shivered, muttering his name in a kind of trance.

She was a slender woman, rather above the medium height. She looked fantastic, and her appearance reflected her mind. Her gown was of dull green, and did less than justice to her fine figure. When she did not wear green she wore scarlet, till

weak eyes ached at the sight of her. She was original but vague, like a woman who might have been a genius, who ought to have been a genius, and marvelled in secret why she was not, eating her heart out in spiritual famine. She was of elusive personality; her vagueness indeed was the most certain thing about her; she was one of nature's impressionist sketches.

She said again: "Lewis, what has happened?"

"An accident, Kate."

"My good God!"

"I am not responsible!" he cried in sudden excitement.

Lady Bir put one hand before her eyes: with the other she supported herself at the head of the sofa.

Krehl began to walk about the room: an itch of unrest was upon him, an abnormal brilliancy in his eyes. He held out his hands to Lady Bir as if she were a shy child.

She took a step forward; then stood

still, panting. Her posture suggested the melodramatic imagination. She was like an ill-trained actress exaggerating her part.

"You are free, Kate — we are free," Krehl said. "The tyrant's wings have been clipped!"

She questioned him under her breath: "What do you mean, Lewis? You have not —"

"No, no; nothing of that!" he broke in reproachfully.

His fingers trifled with his watch-chain, and taking out his watch, he looked at it, without noting that it had stopped.

"I have done no wrong, Kate. I offered my life for yours. But he would not have it so. No! — *you* were the price. He thought to command me! Would not listen to reason. And now there he is!"

"*Where?*"

"At the bottom of the Dark Stair! — Kate, there is nothing to fear! He was not sober. It was his own doing!"

"Lewis, there is blood on your brow—"

"Yes; that was for you."

Krehl paused: seemed to be listening.

"We were on the stair together. I was going away. He ordered me to come back. You see, he never believed in my strong will! Then he rolled down the stair. . . . Kate, I did nothing! I tell you he was not sober."

Lady Bir strained towards him.

"Yes,—*yes?*—"

"I am not to blame," Krehl said. "I am simply telling you what happened."

"But where is he *now*, Lewis?"

"There!—where he fell. It was an accident!"

"And—you left him—"

"I had nothing to do with it!"

"He may die!"

"Well?—" Krehl drew nearer to her. "Kate, he must be dead now. He is broken in pieces! You know what his life has been. And this is how the gods have flung him off their knees!"

Krehl advanced another step. She repelled him.

"Kate, we must stand by each other in this. We have done nothing! I am going away. You will remain here. I shall leave by the Dark Stair. Then in the morning—"

"We must call the servants!" she cried.

Both stood motionless.

"Lewis," came her whisper, "*why have you told me?*—" And again the cry: "We must call the servants!"

But she did not call them.

"Why have I told her?" Krehl asked himself, and was angered, feeling that he had surrendered power.

He battled for an outward repose.

"You see," he said, "I am perfectly calm."

Lady Bir turned her head affrighted, as if expecting to see some ghostly presence behind. Her eyes were fixed on the door. She appeared to be trying to catch some far-off sound,

"*How long* — do you say?"

"It must be all over now," Krehl said.

"Oh — oh — oh, if you had not told me!" she moaned.

"We are safe, Kate. No one knows I am here."

The image of the shepherd danced before him, and he became more agitated.

"No one can ever know!" he exclaimed. "Kate, our hands are clean. We shall be as one henceforth."

"Call the servants," she murmured. "Call — the — servants —"

She would not look at him. In moments she seemed to grow old, deformed.

"We must share the remembrance of this night, Kate."

On a sudden she slid towards the door, but stopped, and returning to the sofa, reclined upon it in a fainting attitude.

Krehl sat beside her. He kissed her hands and her hair.

"All the future is ours, Kate."

"But this will be with us always," she muttered.

"No, no," he cried in emotional stress. "You speak of slavery, and we have done with that once for all. The door stands open, and love calls. Kate," he said, "I have made a discovery to-night — there is no such thing as conscience. We must be natural, and nature knows nothing of conscience. It is one of the delusions that afflict humanity. I could prove that to you! And remorse — remorse! — that is another name for weakness." His arms were about her. "Ah — ah — we shall be strong together!"

And they shivered in abject wretchedness.

She started up and ran across the room. But she got no farther than the door. There, her face towards it, she sank in a kneeling posture, her head bowed low, her hands on the floor.

Krehl, raising her tenderly, led her back to the sofa.

"He was not fit to live, Kate! And now I must tell you the name he called

you — an adulterous rag! 'And,' he said, 'I mean to set her up as a gazing-stock!"'

Her face assumed a shocking tranquillity. She sat rigid. And then the grimace of despair came to her features.

"Now," Krehl said, "I shall go to his room. No one must know that I have been at Bir to-night. You will wait here till I return."

He left her on the sofa, and hurried to the smoky lair.

XII

THE lamp burned low. Krehl removed it from the mantelshelf on to the table. He picked up the book from the floor, set the chairs and the hearth-mat right, and finally he took the shepherd's cap from the chimney and put it on his head.

He was in the larger room when he saw Lady Bir flit past in the corridor. He hastened after her, and reproached her for having broken her promise to stay in the red room.

"Lewis — I heard him calling!" she whispered.

He took her hand, and they moved toward the Dark Stair. He put his lips to her ear.

"Wait here, Kate."

He stepped out, pulling the door to behind him.

As he began to descend, Lady Bir opened the door cautiously and listened. Not the faintest sound broke the silence. She set one foot across the threshold, and peering down, saw a huddled still thing lying there in the dawn.

Krehl came up and re-entered the corridor. He looked at her, and she understanding, fell upon him moaning. He led her back to the red room.

XIII

THE Lords of Bir went out with this young man; and (and as the observant Wimpress noted) the tears shed because of his death would not have blinded a tom-tit. A coroner's jury deplored the mishap and assured the afflicted widow of their sympathy.

And in due course what was left of him was shut up in lead and oak and slipped on to a great stone slab in the family vault. The servants, and few besides, saw this thing done, and afterwards stuffed over a rollicking feast, making dark prophesyings concerning the future. In the evening of the day of burial a full-blooded groom was rampant for a dance in the kitchen, but cook would not hear of the frivolity, having the fear of Wimpress

before her eyes. When the night was grown sleek and alluring, master groom and a couple of kitchen wenches rambled forth and had a fine giggling time in the garden.

The day after, a sealed letter addressed in Krehl's handwriting — a circumstance never divulged by Wimpress — came for my lady; and in the dusk, decked in a load of mourning, she left Bir: so deep a secrecy in her going that none save Wimpress knew the appointed hour.

She had not desired to see her husband in his death; and the cross of white flowers (Geer's proud handiwork) being shown to her, she turned to the window and stood looking out, the cross going to the place of the dead bearing no message. She had no tears, and if her voice was lifted up in lamentation because of her widowhood, none heard. On her departure, touching little Annetta, "You will be a second mother to her, Wimpress," said she, without emotion. But not a word

did she vouchsafe as to the place where her journey would end.

And, she being gone, and the last of the Birs with his fathers, a torpor of sadness fell on Bir. In all hearts thoughts were held secret; none knowing what a day might bring forth.

And the final rose petals swooned on the brown floor of the old garden: the summer began to put on a serious face; robin redbreast made gray corners momentarily bright, and the north wind's breath was in the air. But of Lady Bir no tidings came.

"What," said Mrs. Geer, on an afternoon in the cottage by the roadside — "what I think so sadly of is my lady caring so little for her own child. I do fear she must have fallen sick, else she'd have writ before now, if only a word."

"Annetta is always speaking of her poor father," Wimpress said. "I am uneasy in my mind sometimes for deceiving her."

"She may take a more cheerful view — where he is — when she's older," Geer remarked. "Not that I'm disposed to the worst suspicion myself. Lord Bir had his faults, and many of them, with some to spare. But he was a downright honest sinner; not like that Krehl, who was such a mixture of both places a plain man could make nothing of him."

"It's unprofitable to pry into the hereafter," Wimpress said. "Besides, Mr. Krehl may be master here yet."

"The wonder to me is he never came back," Geer said. "It's my belief the pair of them are gallivanting about as if nothing had happened."

"We've no evidence to go on for that," his wife urged. "My lady must have suffered a deal, although she behaved so strange after his death. I'll never forget her face at the window the day of the funeral. It made me feel quite faintified, the sight of it."

"Yes; she was a more than natural

kind of woman," Geer said. "Lord, what a man could see in her I could never make out. She was n't a decent armful — all black hair and eyes. It must have been a godsend to them, that accident on the Dark Stair — just in the nick of time too."

"You speak horrible, Stephen. How do we know but he bewitched the poor lady?"

"It must have been mutual," Geer said.

"For my part, I could n't help liking Mr. Krehl," said Wimpress. "I can't believe there was any real badness in him. It was his head more than his heart that was wrong. He was the vainest man I 've ever seen."

"For all we know, he may have something the matter with him," said Mrs. Geer. "There 's new diseases always coming up in these days, and we don't notice them till they 're common. My private feeling is, there 'll be no wedding after all. My lady has great pride of her rank, and Mr. Krehl is below her, according to accounts."

"Bless you, she'd not care for that," Geer said; "and if it comes to rank, what was she herself? Nobody hereabouts ever heard of her family."

"She could keep her title," Wimpress explained, "even if she married Mr. Krehl."

"But would they be wedded lawful," Mrs. Geer asked, "her not having his name?"

"Yes; it's often done."

"They'd look rather mixed," said Geer.

BOOK II

THE GREATNESS OF MAN

BOOK II

I

In a London concert-room, on the fourteenth day after the flight from Bir, Lady Bir was in showers of tears during the singing of an Irish ballad. She was not herself, she told Krehl; telling him also that she knew not what ailed her.

Already she had seen the shadow of a hand writing upon the wall.

At this time she put aside her raiment of widowhood. This she did at Krehl's suggestion. He had but to say the word, and she obeyed. Sometimes a look was enough to make her understand his thought.

"We are as one, Lewis," she was always saying. And she spoke of their taking a

house and settling in London; for, "We can never go back to Bir, you know."

And Bir, he admitted, was become impossible and must be obliterated; and the pictures of Bir in the chambers of their memory must be taken down and destroyed.

So they set about the destruction of the indestructible by going to all kinds of places where crowds gather.

They went one night to a theatre where they saw a play having in it a woman who had come out of sin; and again Lady Bir wept, and spoke so loudly to Krehl that people turned and whispered "Ssh!"

But on the way back to their hotel she said harsh things of the woman, denouncing her as vulgar and immoral; on no account would she take a daughter of hers to see such a play, — speaking as if her youth were a far-off thing. And when Krehl, indifferent, assured her it was all right, and that some women were too proper to be human, let alone interesting,

"Yes, indeed," she replied, "the poor creature is much to be pitied."

They had only, it seemed, one mind between them, and already they were failing to keep that in order.

Of Lord Bir they never directly spoke.

That was their only secret. Yet it was no secret at all; for the soul of each was the other's looking-glass.

Krehl was very, very gentle with her.

They visited the picture-galleries; Krehl lingering over the bad art, — it seemed to soothe him, keeping company with his deterioration. He still kept hold upon himself somewhat; but wherever they went Lady Bir's name was spread abroad. Healthy-minded women, especially women who were wives and mothers, thought of her as a "creature," and imagined they had settled the matter and assigned Lady Bir her place in the moral world. Men, it may be, saw in her more than that.

Not every man, and no conventional man, would have hungered for this woman's

friendship. But an observant man, having vision beyond the surface, when he came to look in her eyes would have reconsidered his first impressions.

The first days in London were of acute nervous distress. But after a while Lady Bir got more calm and tried to feel resigned. And then she began to complain of feeling drowsy, saying she could not understand this, as it had not been so at Bir.

"I wonder what they are doing at Bir," she said.

She was always wanting to sleep in the daytime, and could not sleep at night.

"And my head, Lewis — O the heaviness in my head! My hair must be fading, I have so soaked my head with stuff. Do you think my hair is fading, Lewis?"

"It is beautiful as ever, Kate," he said.

"Ah, I am so glad to hear you say that. I trust you implicitly, Lewis. We must never deceive each other! I would tell you

anything. Lewis, there is something I have kept from you. When a child I was a dreadful *thief*. My mother often thrashed me. My sweet mother! — Lewis, such a pain in my eyes! Oh, if I should be going blind!"

"No, no, Kate."

"Yes, I daresay I am quite well, as you say. And all this must be fancy: this strange idea that I am changing so fast from day to day — from hour to hour, it seems."

She could not bear to have him out of her sight for a moment. She lamented not being able to read; and she became so fretful because people stared at her — "As though," she said, "we were being everywhere watched" — that at last they quitted London and went to a South-coast watering-place.

But the keener air was unavailing, and depression deepened upon them. They were constantly setting out "for a long walk;" but after going a short distance,

they would get into a cab, or crouch in a secluded seat, gazing in silence over the sea.

A coarse uninteresting murder had occurred in the town, and they crept into a corner of the poky little police-court to hear the evidence; and afterwards, at luncheon, they discussed the affair in such a way as to make their neighbours marvel.

"The people in hotels," said Lady Bir, "are all alike: eavesdroppers and full of suspicion! I cannot understand why everybody takes such an extraordinary interest in us. We have done nothing wrong!"

She raised her voice in saying this, and swept her eyes over the tables. Many heard.

"We must not stay here, Lewis. And yet — where can we go for peace and quiet? How I remember the moonlight on the old garden at Bir! Lewis," she whispered, "we must write to Wimpress and tell her to have the Dark Stair pulled down —"

She nudged his elbow. "Lewis, did you hear what that man said? I heard it plainly; I was expecting him to say something about us."

But this, so he told her, was a small matter, since they had their own life, and could shelter there invulnerable, unassailable. He was not amused; did not smile; was not angry; simply did not care — for this, for anything.

"Do you see that woman over there, Lewis, with the black hair and fine eyes? She must have secrets!"

At this, spoken in a loud tone, the lady indicated left the room, a friend going with her.

Krehl and Lady Bir went to a window, which Krehl threw open, though the wind swished bleak from the east. The hotel manager came in, looked at them, and spoke to the waiter.

"Shall we stay here always, Lewis? We might take a house, and have things sent from Bir. I have seen many poor,

unhappy people in this place. They seem to be everywhere. I should so like to be a Sister of Mercy, Lewis."

The manager, an hour later, courteously asked them to leave the hotel.

II

WITHIN the week, and in phrase less urbane, the asylum of another hotel was denied them. Again, for the third time, a like indignity befell them. And thereafter they went into private lodgings in a poor quarter of the town.

Of these pillar to post experiences they made little or no murmur: apparently regarding all this as a matter of course. The hand on the wall was writing it against them, and there was nothing for them to say, nothing to do.

Lady Bir, breaking long periods of melancholy silence, would talk excessively of trivial things, as if this were anodyne. And occasionally while she talked she fell in a drowse; but in her partially conscious state her eyelids were never still, nor the

nerves of her face, nor the wax-like fingers on her lap.

And Krehl, sitting watching her thus, seemed to pay no heed to her condition, nor indeed to his own. He had ceased to feel inspired. He was more self-conscious, but less curious. He no longer adored the shadow of himself; and mankind had begun to walk in a vain show.

He had picked up a saying, "the Great Silence," and it was often in his mind, and frequently fell still-born on his lips. He did not give it expression, because the time was not yet.

His recollection of Lord Bir was become vague; the most vivid personality within the sphere of his deadening consciousness was that of the shepherd Richard Eade. He remembered the man's face, his walk, his searching dark eyes, the decisive clear tones of his voice; he was Krehl's last idealisation, a mystic inscrutable being going to and fro in the world, carrying the sword of fate; and sometimes he looked

for him in crowds, never doubting that they must meet again, yet knowing that he should deny him. And when insomnia set in, and the nights were peopled with dusky fancies, he would see Richard Eade stand awhile by Lord Bir's corpse, — that log-like thing that could not be removed from the foot of the Dark Stair, — then go up the stair and vanish in the corridor.

They had two small rooms, and these they seldom left in the daytime. The woman of the house never learned their names. She was kind, and they seemed grateful.

A neighbour shared the landlady's confidence concerning her lodgers' strange ways.

"My heart tells me there's something amiss, that should be looked after. And yet it seems as if none can help them."

"What do they drink?"

"Brandy; always brandy. I've found it under their pillow even. At first, when they came they kept it out of my sight,

as if ashamed for me to know, though I'd always my suspicions. And the drugs and messes they have about them! I've thought he must be a doctor, from the mixtures he makes. I often hear them talking through the night, as if they never slept; he's walking up and down, up and down the room, like a prisoner, and sometimes she walks with him, and I've heard them open the window in the dead of night, making my blood run cold to think what they might have on their minds. But they seem to be gentlefolks, and pay in advance for everything, with never a grumble; so it's none of my business what makes them behave so. They let me cook whatever I like, but they hardly eat enough to keep body and soul together."

"Do they quarrel?"

"Goodness, no! I've never known a fonder couple. The very ground he walks on, she worships it, and if he's not as bad with her, he's always wonderful good

and polite. A harsh word to her I've never heard him say. He don't pamper her of his own accord, but if she makes a motion or a wish, there he's ready to do it. But what's most wonderful, I've seen them look — look — as if they were frightened of one another. He's a good-looking man, but takes no pride in himself; nor does she, though soon after they came she asked for a looking-glass, and she's put it on the parlour mantel, and often looks at herself and says the queerest things to him. Once when I was in the room laying the cloth, the glass fell, and you never saw a woman in such a scare of fright, and she ran with it to the window to make sure if it was broke or not."

"Was it?"

"No; and she clapped her hands and laughed till I feared for hysterics. But he can always pacify her by taking her hands, and when he does that she looks at him till you'd think he was her idol. It's

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trying to have them in the house; yet they're as harmless as can be, and give no trouble except for their untidiness. They've no sense of keeping things in their right place; and I've known them pull down the blind and sit for hours and hours in the dark."

"Would you say they're husband and wife?"

"I've my own thoughts of that, but nothing to go by. What," the landlady asked, "makes her so fond of telling me he *is* her husband?"

On the wall of their dingy sitting-room was a picture of an aged couple seated on a bench by a river, and of this Krehl told the landlady, in one of his rare breaks from reticence, that the painter was a man of compassionate nature.

"He was merciful," Lady Bir said. "Oh, if we could only be sure of mercy!"

She wrote a letter to Wimpress; and Krehl having read part of it, put it in his pocket, making no remark.

"Lewis, shall we get rid of Wimpress? For, you know, if we should go back to Bir—"

But he assured her there was nothing to fear, and she said, "No; there is nothing to fear." This was their gospel, and they were always trying to believe it.

As, toward the declining of the day, they left the house, Lady Bir (whose lapses of memory were becoming more and more frequent) said to the landlady: "Should an old woman—a dear, kind-hearted old woman—arrive during our absence, be good enough to ask her to stay." And Krehl not correcting her: "The woman is not a lady," she added, "but she is so very faithful, and we respect her greatly." Even then Krehl had nothing to say.

They walked slowly toward the sea. Children were romping in a grassy space.

"Poor — poor children!" Lady Bir sighed.

Soon she began to complain of fatigue; and they got into a cab, and there sat till the driver turned on the box and asked for instructions.

"What?" Krehl said absently.

"Please do not be rude, and drive on," Lady Bir told him.

The man drove at random. When they were outside the town, they had the cab stopped, and alighting, wandered along the cliff, high above the sea. A notice-board bore the word "Dangerous;" they looked up at it, each uttering the word; and then, as though it made no incision in their minds, they walked directly on to the place of danger.

"This rock is crumbling away, Lewis. And look at the sea, far down there."

Each step carried them nearer to the edge of the cliff. A coastguardsman, on the gray-white chalk road, watched them. They did not see him; but walked on fascinated, hand in hand.

At last, on the brink, they stood motionless, gazing into the shining depths. And then, hearing a voice calling from behind, they drew back slowly, and as it seemed reluctantly, their bodies inclining the while toward the sea in an attitude of adoration.

"It's not safe there, you know!" the coastguardsman cried, running up breathless.

They made him no answer, and strolled leisurely on to the road.

"I wonder if Wimpress will come," Lady Bir said. "There are no cliffs at Bir," she added.

III

Of their two visits to Paris the first was brief, ending on the fourth day. They had stayed a day in Rouen, thinking to see the cathedral, but wearing instead the time in a darkened room.

From Paris they went to Italy. In Rome Lady Bir remained in a half-conscious state for twenty-four hours, uttering scarcely a syllable. For three days in Florence neither tasted solid food. Although a couple of days were passed in Milan, they remembered nothing of it save a great white dome with a gold cross shining in the sun.

When they were back in Paris in October, Lady Bir spoke of the fatigue of this roving life.

"It has helped us," Krehl said.

And she answered, "Yes;" and both retreated instantly from the import of the words, fearful of tearing aside the veil because of the thing they might see there — that something extremely to be avoided.

And now they began to regard themselves as exiles, and nurtured petulantly a sense of restricted rights; and Krehl, saying they must keep out in the open, said also that life was squeezing itself up tight: spoke ambiguously of the point of a needle, the sons and daughters of men dancing thereon; and from such extravagance, "We must make Paris our home," he added.

She was all for that too: yet without vehemence. Her raptures were less frequent: a morbid lethargy her normal condition.

Nevertheless, in moments of excitation (which were invariably followed by a profounder mental and bodily prostration), she insisted that she had never really

lived till now: had never till now known that perfect liberty in which all things were seen and understood. This it was to be alive, to know no fear, no disquietude, to beat one's wings boldly against the farthest outposts of freedom. And Krehl, to these fevered protestations, this mournful paradox, would listen in a kind of sinister demure complacency, occasionally smiling to himself, but never having much to say.

They made no friends in Paris; sought none; and English people coming in their way were regarded with mistrust and abhorrence.

Now and then, going out in the daytime, they would sit close together in cafés watching the crowds, yet failing to distinguish persons, and exchanging scarce a word with each other.

But gradually they shunned the day, leaving their hotel only after dark, and then going often to unhallowed places. Their delusions and their lassitude in-

creased, neither resisting. The instinct of self-preservation was fading within them.

Lady Bir, while in extreme exhaustion at the Odéon, was addressed with kindness by an English lady, but replied rudely that she was quite well; and Krehl looked on apathetic.

Already her beauty was in tatters; she was grown thin and haggard; prolonged insomnia had given her eyes an inexpressibly dull, heavy, pathetic expression. Her memory was gone.

She asked Krehl one day how she would look when she was dead, and said she had been trying to see herself so.

"I should like to be buried at Bir," she added. "Oh, shall we ever see Bir again! —" And she murmured about the snow that would presently be falling on the dear old garden, and the birds on the window-sills, with no one to feed them now, and the moonlight on the golden euonymous.

No physician was consulted.

"We are all right," Krehl kept saying.

They would impute their torment of sickness to no cause, nor call it by any name.

IV

On a certain day, that was like a blurred sepia drawing faintly coated with gold dust, they wandered into a great church, and Krehl roaming about casting careless glances at the pictures, lost sight of Lady Bir.

In a dark corner by and by he came upon what appeared to be a worn old woman on her knees in an attitude of supplication; and his whole aspect changed as he stood behind, looking at her.

"If she should be right, after all—"

He touched her; and she lifting her face in stunned anguish, gazed toward the altar. He saw her lips move, and for a moment held his breath.

What was this? Far-off voices and a light somewhere shining clear. He

touched her shoulder again, somewhat querulously. And the light faded; and the voices were still.

The feel of the sharpened bone (for she was shrunken to a shadow) probed him as with a nameless degradation. And he told her, in the street, that she must not give way to these childish fancies, so enervating, so futile. She listened, silent, tearless.

But, being hid again in their room, she grovelled at his feet in an abandonment of grief, and he caressing and comforting her, chided tenderly, kissing her hands and her hair. (Never, from this moment in the church, did their lips meet again.) And he told her they must go forth into the world and forget, making the most of the substantialities of existence.

And shortly after they hurried away to a place of shameless entertainment, yielding themselves to convulsive exhausting excess, — violent interludes which were always succeeded by long hours of le-

thargic insensibility to the common graces of social life.

Thus they tried to clip the wings of conscience and make illegible their identity amid the dregs of humanity. And the old ideals about which in time past they had talked so much (talked too much) fluttered feebly within them with sightless eyes.

Of the two Krehl sank now the more rapidly; and the woman saw with the man's eyes and groped upon the deeps with his hands.

Having one night made believe to sup at the Café Toronti (for the florid gaiety of which in their tense moods they had a marked preference), they made their way at near midnight to a noisome haunt of which Krehl had lately heard; and here they were speedily in the midst of a tempestuous raving mob of moral anarchists, male and female after their kind, — and all at once Lady Bir, swinging out reckless in a furor of nervous excitement, laughed boisterously, wept, screamed, and danced

mad dances with all sorts of monstrous, depraved creatures.

At one in the morning a slouching evil-faced youth demanded that she should sing an English song; others called for "God save the Queen." A crowd gathered round her, and she was about to begin to sing, when Krehl came up, flung himself across the cleared space on the floor where she was standing alone, cried out, "No, no; not here! not to-night!" — and took her away.

And no sooner was the pandemonium left behind than she relapsed into her habitual listless, nerveless condition, cringing abjectly to Krehl and weeping softly during the slow drive to their hotel.

On the doorstep of the hotel a dreadful little old woman was lying intoxicated; and Lady Bir, having knelt to look at the woman's face, wept the more, and began to speak of her mother, her mother's last words, her mother's pious life and saintly beautiful death.

Another night they went to the Moulin Rouge, where Krehl again and again held out his hat on a level with his face for cocottes to kick; and the night following this they were at the Bal Bullier, where Lady Bir made a great scene of uproar by rushing suddenly into the midst of a throng of drunken students, her arms uplifted, her aspect frantic, screaming at the pitch of her voice, "Put that woman out! — that low woman looking down the stair! — put her out! put her out!" The students, regarding this as an unrehearsed effect, applauded noisily, one exclaiming with a coarse laugh, "What fools these English are!" And Krehl (a demented look in his eyes) came up and dragged Lady Bir out of the place, the crowd rocking with laughter.

They stupefied themselves to death's door with narcotics that night. But easeful sleep came not.

Next day they left Paris.

V

NEWHAVEN then.

On landing they sat in the harbour station, in extremity of depression, incurious as to what should happen to them; uttering no word for some while, to each other even; their luggage they knew not where, nor seemed to be in the least concerned about it.

A child ran up and down in the thin sunlight from over the sea. Lady Bir's eyes followed the little one in stony, famished gaze.

An official addressing them was regarded with impassivity, which he interpreted as supercilious and went his way. Lady Bir felt the cold, and her fingers curled inward, hid under her cloak. Krehl looked peevish; his degeneracy was beginning to wear a morose complexion.

Then a cabman, pressed for a job, stood before them touching his hat, proffering his services.

"England," Krehl said, and shook indeterminately his sloth; and Lady Bir, repeating the word, muttered also "Home," and leaning oblique (the cabman being in the way) was greedier for sight of the scampering child.

At last, wearily rising, she bade the man drive them to a lodging; what or where it might be they did not mind provided it was respectable. She emphasised the adjective, becoming agitated. She detained the man to add that her husband had a strong antipathy to English hotels; grew more excited, called English hotels disgusting places; but saying this in French, and the man staring, "We have been so many years abroad," she explained, "at our delightful home in Paris."

She had lost the habit of accuracy. In her cloudy vision of little Annetta she imagined the child as a woman with re-

proachful eyes and manner of cold proud reserve.

So it fared with them that they were cast involuntarily into a house in the dullest quarter of this dull town, where they were watched suspiciously by a female of uncouth presence, barbaric tongue, and fanatical opinion touching strong drink. She sniffed alcohol continually and made preachments, at first vague, then incisive and rude, all of which fell on unheeding ears.

There were days and nights of misery and deepening moral disorder. And when an evil report concerning her lodgers began to be about, the woman of the house, in ungracious savagery of independence being one day at close encounter with the strangers, charged them bluntly with shiftiness of conduct and speech, declaring that she had no opinion of them that accounted right and wrong all for one, and there was a hint (pretty plain) at worse circumstance, a Commandment being named.

At this Lady Bir told her that she was an ill-disposed, unmerciful person prying upon matters beyond her concern; and Krehl, almost the last spark of self-respect blowing up within him, requested haughtily that she would not attempt to reconcile their statements.

"We make no claim to being consistent," said he, in the manner of a man who having done something fine a long while ago, was trying now to imitate himself with imperfect success.

They submitted, nevertheless, to the ignominy of remaining in the house, letting themselves drift on the lines of least resistance for lack of resolution to confront their torment or courage to throw it away.

"Everyone is against us," Lady Bir said, and, turmoiled with confused thoughts of futurity, she asked Krehl why it was she could no longer remember the Lord's Prayer.

And, "Lewis, when is the last day?" she whispered.

"A handful of dust," said he. "That is the last day."

And she spoke again of her great longing for sleep. She was always dreaming of sleep, she said, and one's dreams never came to pass.

"That dream will," Krehl replied.

"And everything is growing so dark and uncertain, Lewis. I am so tired; I would be so lonely if you were not with me; and I have a dread always that if I were to fall asleep something would happen, — I should see something, in this falling darkness — "

"Nothing is so bad as it seems, Kate," he said. "See, it is broad day. Let us go out for the sunset over the sea."

But dragging in the town, they turned their backs on the sun, going toward the downs.

A violin was being played in a garden, and Lady Bir stopped to listen, shutting her eyes, till Krehl took her arm.

"Lewis, how far are we from Bir now?"

And he not answering, "I wonder what Wimpress will say," she added.

Some school children, pausing in the shelter of a blank high wall, gazed upon them as they passed. Krehl standing to look at them, the children huddled together a moment, then ran away.

"You and I have been very unfortunate, Kate," he said.

"Yes, yes, Lewis."

"But we must keep our heads up, you know. We have done nothing wrong! It is all misfortune, and we must not be weak. We cannot surrender when there is no judge over us!"

They stopped to look at the water.

"Nothing is the same, Lewis."

"There is a remedy," he said.

"— or a refuge, Lewis."

He sighed; and they went on. But she stopped again: could walk no farther, she complained, her head inclining toward his shoulder. So they got into a cab and told the man to drive into the country.

The evening had an acute chill, and there was a tawny storm-shine on the sky. The cab reached a small country station, and they alighted, telling the man that they would return by train.

"If not, we shall walk," Lady Bir said. "My husband is very strong. And I am quite well, you know," she told him, smiling familiarly.

VI

THEY wandered into the station; it was very quiet, seemed deserted. Finding the door leading to the platform locked, they seated themselves on a bench in the booking-office, till some one should come. Shrunken autumn trees were out there, strained black on an opalescent horizon. She nudged him, pointing.

"Rossetti," said he, languidly.

"Did you hear that?" she asked. "The sound of children's voices."

He heard, but made no reply. And then the door of a waiting-room was opened cautiously a little way, and from the whispering and sly merriment the room appeared to be swarming with children.

"Shut the door, Bertie, or I'll tell mother," a voice of tremulous authority said. "You don't know who it may be."

"He's opening it more! My! won't you get the strap, Bert?" another threatened.

But Bertie was not thus to be disheartened, and adventurously thrust himself forth to see; a plump little fellow, bubbling over with vitality, his nose tarnished in the humorous wars at the gate of life. Other children, boys and girls, all very clean and very red, pushed behind their leader in mischief; she in authority calling out in awful tones from the unseen: "I'll tell on you all, every one of you; and oh, won't you catch it when mother comes?"

"When is there a train for Newhaven?" Krehl asked.

The children began to giggle, two little girls clasping each other round the neck in fits of laughter; and then suddenly all darted out of sight. But the door was not

shut, and sunny heads and bright eyes appeared again.

"I 'm not frightened," said one.

"Nor me," said another. "Tell him."

"Four o'clock," said a third.

"Five o'clock," said a fourth.

"Ettie, you 's pushin me," whimpered a baby girl.

"Half-past eight!" bawled the broken-nosed warrior, turning immediately upon the others with a wild shout and scaring them helter-skelter into the room.

"Oh, Bertie! Oh, my! — *now!* Well, my man, you just wait till mother comes!" authority was heard declaring, "*then* you 'll get you know what!"

This dark saying momentarily subdued high spirits. But master Bertie, having a soul above the low horrors of the strap, once more showed his eager flushed face.

"You say first, Tom," he whispered to a smaller rogue peeping over his shoulder.

Lady Bir began to weep and wring her hands.

"Hush, Kate, hush; they are going to tell us when there is a train," Krehl said.

"You first, Tom."

"Fourteen o'clock!"

"That was Tom! Very well, then; I would n't be in his shoes for something. I *will* tell now!"

"Fifteen o'clock!"

"If that was n't Percy! One as bad 's the rest. Oh, my gentlemen, you just wait and see which end of the strap you 'll get for your supper when mother comes!"

And now came the blemished warrior's turn.

"Twenty-four o'clock in the morning!" he yelled, as if that were the last thing he should say before being led forth to slaughter. And indeed he was there and then hauled back ignominiously by the hair; the door being shut violently, amid screams.

"My Annetta! — my darling Annetta!" Lady Bir cried, walking to and fro in

extreme agitation. "Lewis, we must go to Bir; I must see my poor Annetta before I die!"

And when she had said this, he stood up also, and held her hands, all his manhood dismayed. He had no words, only a dead tenderness of caress.

But she would not be comforted, and resting her face on his breast sobbed out again: "Take me home, Lewis . . . take me home!"

"No, no," he said, "we cannot go there!" A train was heard in the distance, like a rocket whizzing through the air.

VII

HAVING, on another day of haunted wandering, fallen in a dull confusion as to their whereabouts, they at last stopped on an old stone bridge in a wood, and leaning on the parapet, looked at the water writhing about the roots of the trees.

They stood close together, shoulder touching shoulder. And when the man's hand hung down feebly over the parapet, so too did the woman's, still more feebly. He stroked the yellow stonecrop, and she drawing her fingers over it caressingly, murmured. "How pretty it is!" And when he said, "Some one may come to tell us the way," she repeated his words, adding, "We shall sleep to-night, after our long walk."

But none came to give them guidance. Woodland noises enlarged the solitude. Night drew near, on a gray sad wind.

"Lewis, the water seems to be crying."

"Nature has no tears," said Krehl; "only an eternal sorrow, as if she knew that we are playing the foolish game of hide and seek with her, and must be caught."

"Must be caught," said Lady Bir.

"She makes a few joyous things," said Krehl, "throbbing nestlings in her bosom. But all are doomed."

He lifted up his face, as to an inscrutable deity, and in the same moment Lady Bir lifted up hers.

"Visible yet invisible mother and father of all, we worship you! We cannot help ourselves; you could not help creating us. You do not care; we are the shadows of shadows upon your breast; man and his supremest art, his highest endeavour of toil and thought, must end in dust and vapour under your immutable power. But

we worship you! We ask not for the courage of life, but for the higher courage to perceive that we belong to you and must be absorbed into your soul. Before you we are blameless. This we know, and know no more. It is enough!" he cried, and stood in sacrificial posture; the woman standing by his side, a swaying reed of humanity.

"Blameless," she said; "we are blameless . . ."

And they leaned again on the parapet.

"Is the water very deep, Lewis?"

"Only a brook," he said. "Let us go a little farther."

"Yes; let us go a little farther," said Lady Bir.

They dragged on aimlessly for half an hour. She took his arm; his step was in advance of hers. They met no one.

VIII

COMING to an inn on the confines of the wood, they entered it and asked for a room for the night. The landlady did not at once reply. Her husband, she remarked, was away from home and would not be back till late.

"We have no desire to make the acquaintance of your husband," Lady Bir said. "We simply require a bedroom. This is a public tavern, and you have no right to refuse us."

The landlady answered that she would see what could be done for them. So they sat on a bench in the bar space beside a malodorous wayfarer who was boasting to the countrymen of the number of public-houses in which he had got drunk in his time. He gave names, a turgid catalogue,

and challenged comparison. A minor toper, jealous of his reputation, asked, "What about the Shoulder of Mutton and Cucumber at East Wesper?" and being laughed at was for cracking the wayfarer's crown with a pewter pot. The landlady, in the midst of the tumult, beckoned Krehl and Lady Bir to go round to a side door.

"We have but one spare room," she said, "upstairs; and there's cold beef boiled and home-made pickles if you want supper."

"Thank you," Lady Bir said. "I am sure you are kinder than your manner implies. I hope we shall like you; we may stay here if we do."

On being shown their room: "Please, please light the fire," she said complainingly. "How can you expect a lady and gentleman to live in this dreadful little place without a fire? It is impossible; we cannot do it."

An old sofa of enormous size was by the window; Lady Bir sank on it exhausted.

"We have been travelling about a long while, and find the people of this country so discourteous and unsympathetic. We may winter in Egypt," she added, "although most of our friends live in Paris."

"Bring some brandy," Krehl said, "and candles."

"Oh, yes, we must have several large wax candles," said Lady Bir. "My husband prefers candle-light."

"There 's not a wax candle, big or little, in this house," the landlady replied. "I 've never before been asked for such a thing."

"Never mind," said Krehl; "anything will do."

"Yes, we shall do without wax candles for one night," said Lady Bir. "I don't suppose you have silver candelabra."

"That we have n't," the landlady exclaimed.

"Oh, my good woman," said Lady Bir fretfully, "pray do not be rude; it irritates us when you shout in that common way.

We have a perfect right to be in your house; but my husband — "

("Her husband!" said the landlady to herself.)

"— is very easily pleased, and we do not wish to put you to any inconvenience. We are acquiring knowledge of this locality, and should we find it pleasant, and the people well-behaved, we shall settle down here and build a mansion and send for our servants."

"Excuse me," said the landlady, and bluntly asked them to pay in advance. They had no luggage: she had never set eyes on them before.

"There is no need to apologise," said Lady Bir; "your request is not unusual." She gave her a sovereign. "You may keep the change till the morning."

IX

THE fire was lighted, and a pailful of coal and wood set by the fender. Two candles were placed on the mantelshelf; supper was laid. And then the door was shut, and Krehl locked it.

They drank brandy.

"That woman will listen at the door," said Lady Bir.

She was still wearing her hat, a shabby thing of black velvet, a full blown pink rose going to pieces among bedraggled black plumes.

"Those drunkards are quarrelling downstairs," she said.

"It will soon be closing time," Krehl observed.

He pulled up the blind, and stood

at the window looking out. Lady Bir inclined toward him over the back of the sofa. An empty glass was in her hand.

"Do you hear that, Lewis?"

"I hear," he said.

"What is it?"

"The men in the inn."

"No; the other sound — just out there."

"A man is chopping wood."

"Not that! not that! — Is anyone in the garden?"

"There is no garden. A cleared space; a heap of firewood."

"But how can the man see?"

"He has a lantern."

Lady Bir rose and stood beside Krehl.

"Yes; a man with a lantern chopping wood. All those trees too! — Can't you hear it, Lewis?"

"A night bird, perhaps."

They watched the man gather up the fuel and carry it indoors. As he passed under their window, a vague slouching

figure, "I wonder," said Krehl, "what he looks like from the stars."

"Why — from the stars, Lewis?"

"It occurred to me: a consoling notion; it levels all."

"He has come back for his lantern. How dim and stealthy he seems! I cannot think of him as a human being."

"There is a difference," said Krehl, "from the stars."

He left the window; the blind remained up. The braggart wayfarer and the countrymen wrangled outside. Gradually the voices failed in the distance; doors were locked and bolted; silence fell on the inn.

But there was one strange sound without, — a small keen tapping, the finger of mystery, at once near and far.

"What is it, Lewis?"

He made no answer. She asked him again, and he turned to her.

"You should know, Kate."

"I don't know, Lewis." Her eyes were

fixed: she was gazing back into her own brain. "It is coming nearer! . . . "

He steadied her with his arm.

"Yes; he is coming nearer. Between us and him stands fear. I am not afraid."

"You are so brave, Lewis!"

"Nor will you be afraid, by and by. I am waiting for you; he is waiting for us. He is terrible only in apprehension; he brings the kiss of peace."

"The tapping has ceased," said Lady Bir, "as if he had heard you!"

And Krehl sighed. "Better luck to his next visit," he said.

"He will come again, then?"

"That is the only certain thing now," said Krehl. "He will never be far away. In any case he will come; it is so common, to try to evade him; he is conquered when we go to meet him. Then we usurp his power, become his master by showing our contempt for him; and then in one splendid moment we achieve the great reconcilement!"

"Lewis! —"

"Shall I pull down the blind?" he said, "and shut him out — for to-night?"

But she did not speak; and the window remained bare to the night.

X

HE gave her more brandy, and she shivered as she drank it. But his own hand was steady.

"We shall have to confess it, Kate — to ourselves; it concerns none else."

"Confess," she said.

"That we have failed, you and I."

"We have failed," she said.

"There must have been something wrong in the beginning; we did not have a fair start; we came forth from silence loaded with the weaknesses of dead generations. That is why we invented an art of life; we should not have needed it had we been whole — for life is its own art. We had the finer gifts, Kate; but they were not for a long season, and the blight of winter — the winter of hopeless failure

— is upon us. The spring will not return: we shall not walk again through the green meadows; it may be that we learned too much under the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Faith has faded in us, and the world darkens and recedes. Our souls have grown gray; there is no more fire from heaven."

He threw back his head; his manhood drowning caught at the wreckage of his self-respect.

"We must not whine," he cried. "We shall end in our own way. It is at least in our power to go out brilliantly!"

She wiped with her finger-tips the moisture from her temples.

She said, "I am in your hands, Lewis."

XI

THE inn was so quiet, the night so still, that a sheep-bell could be heard from a fold far down by the wood.

She helped him presently to draw the sofa on to the hearth; and they sat on it, one at each end, in unbroken silence till past midnight. Lady Bir then removed her hat, letting it fall on to the floor behind the sofa. The supper was left on the table untouched.

The fire began to go out. They watched its gradual ending; neither rising to put on fuel, though the room was in the chill of the dead hours. The grate at one o'clock was black.

"The fire is out, Lewis," the woman said from her corner. But she did not look at him.

"It does n't matter," he muttered.

"No," she said, "it does not matter. We are not cold."

Her eyes wandered to her hat on the floor, but she did not pick it up. Her feet were damp and leaden; she drew them in under her dress as she crouched farther into her corner. Was that the tapping again? Lewis had said it would come; and she must not be afraid.

Drowsing, she had a vision of her childhood: she lay in her mother's arms, in the meeting of birth and death. O the wonder of it and the sweetness and the awe! mother's tender arms, mother's breast; and this . . . *this* . . . O merciful God, O compassionate Son of God, was there to be no rest for ever, no refuge from this torment, no more sunshine or flowers or peace of mind! Her heart fainted under her wretchedness, and her expiring youth, parched in its last agony, drank up the tears that would not come to her eyes.

And she remembered his goodness to her, his patience, his loyalty, exaggerating all in the utter loneliness of her state. And she said to herself she must keep very still and let Lewis sleep. He looked so tired and worn; poor Lewis.

They ate nothing. They did not go to bed. All night they remained in their clothes on the sofa.

At three o'clock Lady Bir perceived that one of the candles on the mantelshelf had gone out. The other was guttering. She gazed at it awhile, her head on one side (in the manner of a person half awake observing unfamiliar sights), her right arm hanging over the back of the sofa. Then she crept along to Krehl, and her head fell on his shoulder.

"Lewis," she whispered.

"Yes, Kate."

His eyes were shut.

"I thought you might be asleep."

"I have not been asleep," he said.

"But you have had a nice rest. So

have I — a nice rest. The last candle is going out, Lewis."

"It does n't matter," he said, and did not open his eyes. "We may sleep in the dark."

"It seems very late. We may sleep in the dark," she said.

The candle flickered, making shadows on the wall, and the black bosom of night brooded on the window-panes, as though to press them in. And when Krehl at length lifted his swollen eyelids, she said to him, after watching his profile a moment:

"What is it you see, Lewis?"

His scarce perceptible smile came — just a crease in the corner of his mouth.

"Dreams. The beautiful fragments that remain."

"Tell me," she pleaded.

"The Sistine Madonna on the slope of a green field. There is a tree, and the silver edging on young beech leaves. On the grass, daisies, and the sun."

"I can't see, Lewis. I ought to see if you can."

"It has faded; it will not return. And now I am in an orchard in spring. I see apple blossoms on a sapphire sky."

"Show me, Lewis!"

"But that fades too. And now," he said, "I am on the Dark Stair."

"The Dark Stair," said Lady Bir.

But she uttered the words as though they had no meaning for her.

And then she said: "Ah, now again I am with you. I too see the apple blossoms on the sapphire sky. And daisies, and poor Mary Magdalen . . . A little child in white, with golden hair, is coming through the orchard. Oh, the little child —"

"Let us dream, Kate," he said, "and not speak." And he closed his eyes.

But she watched the candle go out. And when the room was in darkness she put her hand, baby-like, in his pocket, and murmured —

"Lewis, I am so sorry, oh, so sorry —"

But his lips were motionless.

And after this neither spoke again till the coming of dawn.

"Lewis."

"Yes, Kate."

"It is daybreak."

He glanced at the window.

"Another day," he said.

"Is it time for us to be going?" she asked.

"I suppose it is."

He got up, like a man recovering from anæsthesia. Seeing her hat on the floor, he gave it to her. He held his hands under her arms as she put it on.

"You must have a new one when we get to London."

"This will do very well," she said.

She pulled off a piece of bread.

"We have paid for it, and I shall give it to the robins."

But the window would not open, and she replaced the bread on the table. She took it up again, and tried to eat a bit, but it crumbled at her lips and fell.

"The poor robins won't get any, after all. I am so sorry. I think one has been on our window-sill all night."

"Come," said Krehl.

And surreptitiously they made their escape from the inn.

XII

THEY went forth into the deserted highway; and the morning, a sober delight of sunshine and sweet air, unfolded upon them. But they were blind to its gracious simplicity: for them it had no beauty, no freshness, no ringing gladness of hope; they were deaf to the melodies of natural things. They knew not where they were, nor cared to know.

The pure calm light hurt and offended them, making the man feel obscene and the woman naked. So they hid themselves in the wood, and crossing again the old stone bridge, made no pause upon it. In their stunned and blurred world of thought (the only world that was quite real to them), every day, every hour repeated itself. But the desire for

change of scene was a consuming hunger within them; yet the slightest exertion produced a more abasing lassitude.

By the time the sun was grown lordly over the hills, they had strayed down a green lane between stubble fields. They stopped to look at a swinging blotch of rooks overhead. A plough had been left in a gap in the hedge, and Lady Bir sat on it. Krehl stood beside her, rubbing the dry earth off the coulter. His gaze followed hers to the ground.

"Can you hear anything, Lewis?"

"Only the crows," he said.

Lifting their eyes at length, they saw in the distance, over the opposite hedge, a large building like a church. There was no tower, but a cross seemed to be poised in the bright air. The roofs and turrets of smaller irregular buildings appeared about the church, and over one of these a flag floated, a red and white sign on the serious blue of the sky.

"We must be near a town, Lewis."

"We shall get to a station soon now," he said.

But they did not take up the tangled thread of their wanderings.

An old countryman, knotted with rude toil and stained by the seasons, came along the lane in the tardy pace of age and dumb labour, carrying spade and hoe over his shoulder. On seeing the strangers he made for the farther hedge.

But Krehl said, "Good morning," and questioned him about the distant building. He answered, It was a convent; and Krehl asked him then why the flag had been put up, and was told the priests and monks had come to bless the chapel; he had just seen two go in.

"A convent," said Lady Bir in sudden agitation; "a convent! —" She stood up. "Thank you. Oh, thank you very much for telling us."

She went to the man as he was moving away.

"Forgive me: I would not be lacking

in respect to one so advanced in years. No, no; believe me! But we may be staying here, and we shall need friends. Are you poor?"

"Pretty tolerable poor," he answered, with a pathetic deepening of wrinkles. "The wolf offen at the door; but we 've managed to keep him out up to now, thank God."

"And you are grateful for that!"

"Might be worse," said the old man, shifting his spade and hoe to the other shoulder. "If the big house is to come in the end, let it come, I say, and no disgrace when you 've stuck out agen it till you drop."

Lady Bir took out her purse. "Some day," she said, "we shall devote ourselves entirely to the poor. Body and soul; we shall give up all to the poor! I may tell you we have been very unfortunate. But we are looking for the way — the way out. It is merely a question of time; we must have time! — You will there-

fore understand that we are your friends — the friends of all who suffer — and you will not be offended if I offer you this?"

She placed the money in the gnarled hand. He gave the countryman's salute. But he had nothing to say, and betook himself somewhat hurriedly down the lane.

"He reminded me of my father," Lady Bir said to Krehl as they went in the other direction. "The world was very hard to my poor father."

"The world's verdict is unimportant," said Krehl. "It is informed by a sense of abstract justice; otherwise it would go to pieces. But in the personal case it is always wrong."

"My father was a disappointed man, Lewis."

"There is no spectacle which gives the world so much satisfaction," said Krehl. "That is why, before one's fellows, surrender is the last error of judgment."

"You say — 'before one's fellows' —" She was become more excited, and seemed to be trying to think for herself.

Krehl smiled. "The other tribunal is the abstract justice I speak of. It is in the air and quite beyond us. We are its creatures, the ugliest, most wonderful, most foolish of its playthings, and it is impossible for us to comprehend the intricate machinery by which we are projected hither and kept dancing helplessly for a brief space in the heat of the sun. My fellows are neither better nor worse than I, whatever antics they may have played before high heaven."

He pressed her hand.

"Kate, the supreme happiness, the crowning act of self-expression, is to have done with it. Once, while lying on the ground in a hot summer noon, I watched the birth of countless minute insects: they were sucked up by the solar light and instantly absorbed in it. But they had their moment of being — brief, brilliant, an unsullied ecstasy: it

was not shorter than ours, remember. And then Nirvana!"

"But there is a difference, Lewis, somehow—"

"A longer breath," he said, and sighed upon his. "That is all, Kate."

XIII

THEY stopped at the gate of the convent; Lady Bir's agitation increased.

It was very still, she said; no one about; all those white muslin blinds across the windows; no iron bars; most of the windows open; was this the smell of incense or sweet-brier? She could not see the chapel, nor the flag, and was that a blackbird singing?

And then she began to tell Krehl how, when a girl, she had been possessed by a desire to take the veil.

"Their peace comes out to me," she said, "their beautiful, perfect peace!"

"Perhaps less than perfect," he suggested.

But she appeared not to hear him, and asked, "Would they let us go in?"

"Strangers are sometimes admitted on their great days," he replied. "I have heard Mass in a convent in France."

"What were they like, Lewis — the nuns?"

"I can only recall one face: that of the nun who sang the Inclina Aurem."

"She must have been like an angel!"

"No doubt. She sang divinely, and all the while she was gazing at a girl's stylish hat."

Again Lady Bir seemed to be unconscious of his words. "Oh, the restfulness of their lives!" she said.

She held the handle of the gate. "If it should be unlocked!" She turned the handle. "Lewis, you see — it is open! Shall we go in?"

He nodded, and went in first; Lady Bir followed. They walked on grass. In a niche between two windows a statue of the Virgin was garlanded with flowers.

"How quiet a convent is! I hope we are not doing wrong."

"No one will harm us," said Krehl.

"But if we should be locked in!"

They passed through a little gateway into a garden of peace: late roses amid laurel and yew; white and yellow chrysanthemums under an old gray wall; swallows that had forgot the time of going; a calvary on the arms of which white pigeons dressed themselves in the sun.

"Shall we return?"

"Not yet, Lewis. It is so quiet, and we may never be here again."

She was gazing on the calvary.

"If we were to go up to it—"

"No, no," he said.

"There is a seat," she urged, "at the foot of it—"

"No!" Krehl said in a louder voice. "Let us have done with weakness!"

But she said: "Nuns are very pitiful. No one would be angry with us. And if a nun should come—"

She approached the calvary, involuntarily as it seemed. Krehl caught hold

of her. She did not turn to him; stood gazing.

"You will frighten away the pigeons, Kate. They are sunning themselves, you see."

She went with him across the garden to another gate, and on opening it they perceived the chapel. There were other buildings, and a plantation curved on the hillside. They moved slowly to the door of the chapel.

"What is that, Lewis?"

"They are chaunting," he said. "Shall we go in?" he added with indifference.

"Yes — let us go in."

He lifted carefully the great iron handle, turned it, and letting it hang again, paused a moment. Then he pushed the door with the tips of his fingers. It opened two or three inches; and Lady Bir, peering in over his shoulder, drew a deep breath as she beheld the fresco of the Ascension.

"Do not speak loud," she whispered, holding Krehl's arm. "We must not go

in; only the priests are there. Oh, if they knew we were at the door!"

So they stood looking in upon the white canons and the priests chaunting before the altar of white marble.

"They do not see us, Lewis. One is dressed in purple. There are no seats; the floor is bare. What is that theyare singing?"

He shook his head. "I can only make out a word here and there. The psalms, I think."

A moment there was silence, and the next, "Bonum est confiteri Domino;" and Lady Bir, catching the words and imperfectly repeating them, asked Krehl what they meant.

"'It is good to confess unto the Lord,'" he said, his voice expressionless.

"Lewis!—" She rubbed her cheek on his shoulder. "O—O—Lewis!"

"Ssh, Kate; they may hear."

"But they would not shut us out!" she murmured.

And now a server placed incense at the four corners of the altar and in the midst of the altar. And the incense was lighted on the altar.

"Five lights," said Lady Bir. "Why five, Lewis?"

"I don't know," he answered.

"Five," she said in a heightened accent, as if straining to understand the symbol. "Five lights on the altar!"

"Perhaps — the wounds of Christ," said Krehl.

"Yes, yes; His wounds," the woman muttered. "The sacred wounds! — "

He heard her low moaning.

And then the white canons and the priests, holding lighted tapers in their hands, knelt on the white and black marble of the sanctuary floor and sang the hymn to the Holy Spirit, while perfumed smoke rose from the censers swung by acolytes.

The altar, save for the five flames of burning incense, was bare: no ornament, no flower was upon it: only the pure light

BOOK III

CHERUBIM AND A FLAMING SWORD

BOOK III

I

THE first frosts were come, cropping the ears of late flowers, erasing the last smiles of autumn; and Stephen Geer, cutting down blackened dahlias in the garden, stopped to rouse his blood by swinging his arms mightily, till Wimpress and Mrs. Geer, sitting before a sweet-scented wood fire in the housekeeper's room, could hear his hands thump, thump against his great shoulders.

The women conversed in tones that just crossed the hearth, as if fearful of being overheard.

For now a deeper gloom had fallen on Bir, as of long vigil by an inscrutable deathbed, none knowing what an hour might bring.

"There 's some that needs to learn their prayers," Wimpress was saying.

Another man, as she spoke, came up the garden path wheeling a barrow, into which Geer flung an armful of frozen dahlias.

"I see Stephen has got a new man to help him. I seem to know his face."

"Richard Eade," said Mrs. Geer. "He was shepherd at Fletching farm, but I 've not heard how he came to stop his work there. Stephen says he 'll only want him till the dead things is cleared off the ground and the garden made tidy for the winter."

"Richard Eade; so it is," Wimpress said, looking through the window. "He is changed considerable since I saw him. Does he still live with his old mother on Hellingby Common? A long way for him to walk."

"He don't live there now. His mother 's been dead and gone this month and more, and now Richard is lodging at Burpham."

Mrs. Geer went on with her knitting. "There's some story about a married woman and him. But you can't believe half you hear when a woman's character is put on the wind; it's like weed seed, sure to fall somewhere, and more often than not in the wrong place."

"I never knew of his mother's death," Wimpress said.

"No; he kept it almost to himself, for he's not a man to talk idle. There was but two or three at the funeral. He found her dead in her chair, with her Bible open on her lap and her spectacles on, as if she had known it was coming, and composed herself. They say Richard called on a neighbour and said to her, 'I'll be thankful if you'll come and lay out my mother,' as calm as if he had but lost a lamb or a dog, instead of his own mother. It's not that he's unfeeling, but cold and distant, and I don't doubt he had grief when nobody was there to see. Them kind of silent men feel deep."

"I was not acquainted with her," said Wimpress.

"She was a queer woman, according to accounts, and very reserved and religious to them she did n't take to. She was jealous, near to craziness, I 'm told, of the thought of her son being married, and for her sake and the peace of home he never went to Burpham, where the woman is. And now he 's living in the same house with her." Mrs. Geer sighed. "It 's enough to make his old mother rise in her grave, after all her watchfulness and worry to keep them asunder."

"But he looks a decent, respectable man," Wimpress said. "A fine man, too, in his appearance. Look how he carries his shoulders, wheeling that barrowful of dead stuff."

"Oh, I 'm not speaking against his character, or even the woman's," Mrs. Geer said. "There 's a sort of love that 's but brotherliness, more or less. I wonder," she added, "if he has a suspicion of what 's going on in this house."

Wimpress, turning her face to the fire, lifted a foot on the fender, and sat silent.

"You 've never told me how they first came home, Mrs. Wimpress."

"There 's more than that to tell, and it 's not because it 's passed out of my mind," Wimpress said. "It 's a thing never to be forgot."

"Was it you that let them in?"

"No; they came in themselves. I found them in the hall."

"How did they get in?"

"She had kept the key of the main door. I came upon them by chance while crossing the hall, not knowing they were there. At first it was as if they paid no heed to me, and I grew shivery at sight of them, almost doubting them for the same lady and gentleman. Then they looked at me, and I could do no more but look back at them."

"Yes, Mrs. Wimpress?"

"They were sitting in a dark corner, close together, she seeming to lean on

him, both so still you might have wondered of their being alive, but for their eyes. It was as if they had got as far as this, with no strength to move a step farther. Mr. Krehl had grown a beard, his look being a man of middle life, so careworn and the drooping way he sat with his arms hanging over his knees. But my lady was far worse of appearance. Mrs. Geer, only me that's seen her can believe what she has come to. I have never seen such pitiful objects; they looked as if they had been walking for miles upon miles without food or shelter. I was so put to a confusion of shame, I dursen't open my mouth, for fear of the words that might come unbid."

"What did you do then, Mrs. Wimpress?"

"I know not what I might have done, but for little Annetta. I had left her in here playing with her pictures and toys, and she came running into the hall after me. I have thought it might be sinful, but I almost prayed in my heart for the floor

to open upon the dear child, to save her from the sight of her mother like that. You see, if it passes now, it will come back to her when she is older, and she will want to know what it meant."

"Ay, indeed; I 'm full of remembrances of my child-days that oft bring me to the blush."

"The little thing ran up to me and took hold of my dress, wondering why I was standing there, I suppose; and when she looked in the same way, I 'm persuaded she did n't know them for her own mother and Mr. Krehl. Thanks be to the Almighty, I found my mind, and kept firm hold on it, understanding how much depended on me."

"And did no one else come?"

"No. If one of the maids had been in the hall I would have bundled her out quick; for I felt, as I have ever since they came home, — it 's her home, if not his, — that the stopping the tongue of scandal was my duty, and I 'll do

what I can for the good name of the family, you helping me, Mrs. Geer."

"Oh, for that, the fender there would speak as soon as I would. But what happened with the child, Mrs. Wimpress?"

"I thought of putting her behind me to hide her from her mother. But my heart failed — it seemed such a sad insult. So, when Annetta looked up in my eyes, I cuddled her face in my dress; but no sooner had I done that than her mother spoke the child's name, in what was no more than a moan; not calling her, but only twice whispering, 'Annetta — Annetta,' like a mother saying her dying word. Annetta peeped round at her, so frightened as I've never seen her before, and clung tighter to my dress. Then her mother began to cry, and I took the child to the passage entry, and bade her go back to my room and play with her toys."

"What a sensible thing to do!" said Mrs. Geer.

"When I went to my lady, she was crying worse, like a woman fallen on shame, and I said to myself, 'She 's living with this man, and not married;' for she had that kind of look, Mrs. Geer."

"And what did Mr. Krehl say?"

"I don't recall if he said anything then. Her clothes — she was no better than a tramping woman; it was shocking to see her; and Mr. Krehl, who used to be so particular about how he looked, was as bad. That was the only time they have seen Annetta since they came back, and her mother never even asks for her now."

"It 's most unnatural," Mrs. Geer said. "She must be out of her mind."

"If that is not what 's wrong, then there 's worse," Wimpress sighed. "There is something beyond my fathoming. They are both so broken in spirit I can do what I like with them nearly, though they always seem to be hiding some mystery from me. If I knew of any of my lady's friends, I would write and ask them to come, but I

have never heard of them, nor Mr. Krehl's either. Their spirits sink lower and lower, and they so stupefy themselves with drugs that often they seem hardly to know me when I go into the red room."

"The red room too!"

"Yes, they pass their whole time there, though my lady used to be in such dread of the north wing — where my lord put her for punishment that night of his death. But there they have gone, and I can't persuade them to leave it. And sometimes, this being always in the evening, they will go along the corridor to the Dark Stair, and when I have been on the watch, I have seen them stand together before the door, as if listening to the wind, and then whisper and take one another's hands, like children, and go back to the red room. They are often whispering to each other, sometimes in a foreign tongue."

"It's a comfort to me," said Mrs. Geer, pulling her shawl about her shoulders, "that I can see Stephen out there."

"Never once have they left the north wing, and I won't let any of the servants, or anybody else but myself, go near them. You remember the door at the foot of the stair from the first landing? Well, the night before last they locked it, and I was there knocking and knocking a long while, starved with the cold, before Mr. Krehl came and let me in. I got the key from him, and now I keep it."

"Where do they sleep?"

"I have prepared a bedroom for them near the red room, but night after night they never go to bed, nor take off their clothes, but sleep — if you can say they sleep — on a ragged old sofa in the red room; and you may judge of the deplorable state the place is in. I should be ashamed for anybody to see it. But how can I help myself, when they stop me from making it tidy? And now," said Wimpress, her face expressing a deeper uneasiness, "Mr. Krehl is occupying himself with what makes me tremble to go where

they are. One morning he gave me a letter for the post, and two days after there came a box full of phials and tiny packets of powders, and now he has turned the red room into a worse untidiness than ever, till you would think it was a laboratory. He is making what he calls the great experiment."

"What does he mean, I wonder?"

"I asked him the sense of all that ill-smelling stuff, but he only said, the great experiment. Also the Deliverer, once he called it. He always was fond of fantastical names for common things. I believe he thinks he is discovering some wonderful thing that's never been done before. It is a liquid he is making. Everything in the phials and packets, as far as I can see, goes to make the one kind of liquid, and when it's made he can set it on fire, and then the smell is so overpowering, my head swims. Not that it's really unpleasant, but most suffocating and dreadful. How they can bear being where it is, I can't understand;

but they do, and he takes great pride in it. Once," continued Wimpress, "I found the keyhole of the door filled with wadding, the windows shut, the fire out, and a pillow pushed up the chimney, as if to keep out every particle of air — and some of the liquid was burning in a big green bowl on the table, and when I looked at them, sitting there on the sofa, her head on his shoulder, their faces were like corpses to see — like corpses, Mrs. Geer, as I've seen the dead from typhoid; that horrible yellow look; and if I had not thrown open the door and window, and shook my apron to stir the air out, I do believe we should all have been suffocated."

"It gives me a choking in my breast, to think of it," said Mrs. Geer.

"Not to my last hour shall I forget the feeling that came upon me when I went to the stuff on fire in the bowl to put it out. I was so overcome, I ran into the corridor. But they never moved — sat there quite

peaceful, their eyes closed, till I called to them to put it out unless they wanted to be killed, being myself in fear of entering the room again. He only opened his eyes, in a daze, and she opened hers in the same way, both looking at me as if I was a ghost. But they never moved from the sofa. So then in my fright I took the door-mat, and ran in and threw it over the bowl, trembling from head to foot."

Mrs. Geer, neglecting her knitting, said she would never have thought of the mat, but screamed for help out of a corridor window.

"And what did they say to you for doing it?"

"Mr. Krehl said the experiment was near perfection, and my lady joined in his words. She always says what he says, even if it is to make black white. But even a stranger thing happened only last night. Mr. Krehl told me to take him a live tame rabbit, and I took him one of

Annetta's, a dear little pink-eyed thing, and no child could be fonder of dumb animals. Well, he had a bandbox, with a hole cut in the side of it, making a door, and the lid kept on. The box was on the table, Mr. Krehl and my lady standing by, keeping back from me what was to be done. Mr. Krehl put the rabbit in his pocket; then he poured into a saucer two or three drops of the liquid he's been inventing; then he put the saucer inside the box, lighted the stuff, and shut the door. 'If your head was in there, Wimpress,' he said — but no more, casting a secret look at my lady. After a few minutes he opened the door quick and slipped the rabbit into the box. He was more excited than I've ever seen him. Then he opened the door, blew out the light — it made him choke and shake, even so little — and there was the poor rabbit, dead as it could be. I was so upset, both from the shock and the loss of Annetta's little pet, I asked him if his experiment

meant nothing more than a horrible poison, and he said it meant sleep, and my lady let her head fall on him, as if she had no power to stand alone, and said the same. It's most pitiful to hear their constant talk of sleep, as if they wanted nothing besides that, in this world or the next."

"But there's something else they want, poor creatures," said Mrs. Geer, "whatever it is."

"How these troubles will end," said Wimpress, looking out at Richard Eade bending and straightening himself in the clear keen light, "is hid in the bosom of Providence. It's Him, in my belief, that's making signals."

II

THE dusk being come, a new-born moon on the brow of night, a maid, white to the lips, came to Wimpress to tell of a man and woman "hanging out of the red room window."

"Go to the kitchen; there 's naught to fear," the old housekeeper said, dreading otherwise all the same.

She stood outwardly calm till the girl had gone; then, taking no long time to resolve what to do, hastened into the north wing; and while going up the stone steps to the third storey, her heart grew so tumultuous, and her breath so ill to manage, she needed frequently to stop to hold her hand to her side.

The maid must have spoken of what she had seen; for as Wimpress opened the red

room door a current of air caught the loose white strings of her cap. But the moment she entered the room the window was shut down, in a kind of hasty stealth; and Krehl and Lady Bir turned, neither asking why the housekeeper had come without being called.

The room was in darkness, and had Wimpress been a Catholic she would have made the sign of the cross, knowing not why.

"You have no light," she faltered; and was steadfastly minded to have the window fastened secure, when convenient occasion should offer.

She removed the globe from the lamp, aud kindled a match. At this, Lady Bir made an exclamation of dismay; then to Krehl, "Wimpress will frighten him away," she whispered.

He made some reply, in so subdued a tone that Wimpress failed to pick up the words; and Lady Bir turned to the window and looked out, her fingers moving

over the panes, like a child sorry for being kept indoors.

Wimpress, her mind casting about for a solution of their evil condition, yet trying not to think hard thoughts concerning them, went to the window to draw down the blind. But while her hand was on the cord, Lady Bir stopped her, crying out as in panic, "He is there! — standing alone in the garden;" Wimpress replying that she could see nor man nor beast, and if it was a tramp, then there was nothing for him to steal, and if he went to the door he would be sent about his business.

Wimpress had indeed an uneasy notion of some other presence, a something of ashy mystery; but never would she have confessed this to them.

"There is nobody in the garden, my lady," she said, desiring to give comfort. "Nothing but shadows, and trees, and the old sundial."

And Lady Bir, having consulted Krehl's

eyes, let the housekeeper have her way with the blind.

"You must be weary of standing, I 'm sure, my lady."

"We were watching him, Wimpress."

"Well, here is your favourite sofa, and I will shake the cushions nice and comfortable — though it 's not much in the way of comfort you can have in this room, as I have often said, and there 's far more pleasing parts of the house to live in. How long do you think of staying here?"

"Not long," Krehl said.

"Not long, Wimpress," said Lady Bir.

"I hope not, for your own two sakes — the most dismal place; and the smell of these things Mr. Krehl is making can't be good for your health. Lie at this end, my lady; dearie me, you have no strength left; you did ought to look more after yourself, and send for a doctor. If you 'll lift your head I 'll put this soft velvet cushion under. That cushion has been in the family since I can remember, but

it wants taking into the open air to be beat well for the dust. How sadly you do look, my lady!"

"Don't worry Lady Bir, Wimpress," Krehl said.

"But, sir—"

"Oh, I am quite well, you know," Lady Bir murmured. "Quite well, thank you, Wimpress."

She lay on the sofa gazing in bewilderment at the lamp. Krehl stood by her.

III

His former friends, seeing him, would have held their breath. He was like a decayed leaf just holding on to the tree of life, and when the wind should come, there could surely be no resistance. And yet, as if for Wimpress's greater wonderment, he was grown obese, and his shoulders had a broader look; but all the man was slack and unstable, as though no atom of muscle went to the keeping of his frame together.

His face was flabby and unwholesome, and had a slaty dull shine. In his fitful visions, that were growing fainter and fainter, of what had been, what might have been, he felt like a fine tale that had been told, all but the epilogue, and that to the last letter was written in his subconsciousness. He was living, indeed, through his

epilogue, like one of the condemned listening to the putting up of the scaffold.

And it seemed to him that the thing that had sunk him to this utter loneliness must have happened a long while ago; for time immeasurable had passed since the setting in of this eclipse. And now what remained? One thing only. But that thing was an act, a decision. And when the final inspiration, the compelling frenzy came, it would be done, — then the end of the epilogue: sleep, obliteration, nothingness.

Nevertheless, even *that* seemed not worth the doing: a foolish ending, a comedy for the commonplace; and it was a monstrous paradox that he should have to wait upon the heroic mood to do it.

Wimpress, furtively putting the room to rights, was called to by Lady Bir, as to what she was doing with the green bowl, and answered that she was dusting it.

"What does she say, Lewis? She has taken it from the table!"

"Please put the bowl where you found it, Wimpress," Krehl said.

"On the small table," Lady Bir added.

Wimpress obeyed; and a little later she put something under her apron.

"What is that you are stealing, Wimpress?" Lady Bir cried.

"Only a pair of my lord's old leggings. I don't know how they came to be here. They'll come in handy for Stephen, or for Richard Eade, if Stephen don't want them, in this hard weather."

"Leave them here!" Krehl said, amazing Wimpress by his sudden excitement.

And when the long-suffering servant was gone: "She suspects us, Lewis, that cunning old woman. She seems to know."

"She will know more, if she will be patient," Krehl said.

And presently, opening the door, he looked out as if to make sure that Wimpress was not loitering about. Then glancing back he beckoned to Lady Bir. And she rising instantly, they left the red room

and went along the corridor to the Dark Stair.

They carried no light, the lunar rays from the windows guiding them; though indeed they would have known the way blindfold.

Hand in hand, they stood before the door leading on to the Dark Stair.

"Lewis — open the door."

And Krehl said: "If you want us, come!"

And he pulled open the door, and both bowed low their heads, as if in salutation of some august awful presence.

"Lewis, he will never leave us . . ." Lady Bir whispered.

IV

GEER, dropping at sunrise into the potting-shed, found Richard Eade there, and began to consider the morning's work. The hyacinths and tulips needed tying up; the boxes of cuttings for the spring bedding had a mildewed woful look; the old greenhouse was in a bad way altogether. But the flowers could wait, said Geer with some sourness: nobody at Bir cared for flowers now. Never a blossom had been asked for since my lord's death: it was a farce keeping the place going at this rate.

So a couple of spades were put on a barrow, and the men went to the celery trenches, which lay in a bleak strip of garden between the north wing and the wood. And while here, Geer's ill-temper melted in the glow of work, and he con-

descended to ask the new man what he thought of Lady Bir. But Richard Eade made answer saying he had no remembrance of having seen the lady and had no opinion concerning her.

"But you must have heard something."

"I 've heard she drinks."

"Ha! — there 's always them that scandalise their betters," said Geer, who had a taste that way himself. "And what 's your view of Mr. Krehl?"

"I 've never seen him either."

"No?"

"Not to my knowledge. They 're living together, I 'm told."

"Of course they are," said Geer. "Why should n't they?"

"I 've no opinion on the point," Eade replied. "They say he 's as queer as her. What 's he like?"

"That 's more than I can say myself — now; not having had sight of him since he came this time. You 'd think," said Geer, delving furiously, "that Bir was

turned into a monkery, for the quietness and shut-up mystery they carry on; even Mrs. Wimpress as secret as a mole."

"Mr. Krehl is a young man, I hear," Eade remarked.

"Well, for that, he's not young nor yet old; one day he looked the one thing, and t'other the other; he was like a man in doubt of mind whether to look young or old, but always he'd an air of experience. They talk of a great change in him, from some cause or other, though I'm in doubts to put it down to what the women folk say. That sort of thing don't trouble a man much, as a rule; it's the woman that fidgets; when he's tired of his bargain he clears out, if nothing else makes it worth his while to stop. It's no argument, the change in Krehl; he's the kind of man that would grow a beard for his own choice, and then shave it off, only to make folk speak about him. What puzzles me most is, he never comes into the garden now. It can't be the weather, for

I 've known him out in all weathers, and he told me once when he could n't look at the sun he 'd die."

"We 're open to change our mind about that," said Richard Eade.

"I 'm not sure but I 'm glad he stops indoors," said Geer. "He was always pottering about after me, talking of matters he did n't understand. He went on so about my borders till he made my blood boil, though I don't believe he meant to make me offended. It was only his way, but he ought to have been broke of it, and some would tell him sharp to mind his own business."

"They would," said Richard Eade.

"Those beds I took such pains with in front of the house, he said they set his teeth on edge to see their cruel regularity — so I understood him, though sometimes he had an impediment in his speech when he got excited to lay down the law. Nor could I ever satisfy him with my bookays, till at last I let him have a

pretty broad hint; and after that he made them himself, the most straggly crazy things, like flowers gone drunk. If you made him a buttonhole, it was the same; he'd haul it in pieces, then when it was hanging floppy and limp on his coat, he'd call your attention to it, and say that was how a buttonhole should look."

"The fashions do vary," said Richard Eade.

"I've never known his likes for trailing things. A corner where there was white moss and withered sticks would make him talk like a book, and I've seen him stand I donno how long before the red creepers on the south wall gazing as if he was struck. But if he came upon some carpet-bedding you'd spent days and weeks over, he'd curl his lip and turn away, as much as to say that was nothing. Whew!" said Geer, lowering his voice; "I hope his ears aren't as good as his eyes — for there he is!"

"Who?"

"Mr. Krehl."

Richard Eade ran his eyes over the ground.

"I can't see him. Is he among the trees?"

"No; and don't speak so loud — he 's as touchy as a woman in some things."

"Where 's he, then?" said Eade. "Nobody about that I can see."

"He 's up there in the north wing. What a ghost! — Stick to your work, Eade; don't look straight; give him a squint on the sly. He 's watchin us from one of the third-storey windows."

Richard Eade looked; uttered an exclamation; stopped work suddenly, his hand on his spade.

"Don't be a fool, man," Geer said under his breath. "Go on with your work!"

Eade obeyed mechanically. And as he worked, his eyes wandered to the face at the window; and, unaccountably to himself, he recalled the face of a man he had

seen hanged outside a gaol, one bright November morning, — just such a morning as this.

"Don't gape like that," Geer said; "what the devil will he think of your manners?"

"He 's grown a beard," Eade muttered, speaking apparently to himself. "But I 'd have known him again anywhere, from his eyes and the shape of his head."

"Then you 've seen him before?"

"I think I have — once," Eade said. He blundered over his job, slicing his spade through the celery, till Geer had profane words for him.

"You a gardener! You 're not worth your salt if you can't do better than that."

To this Eade made a rather hot response, which the more surprised Geer after the new man's meek submission to authority. It was the first sign of independence Geer had known him to make.

The face vanished from the window; and Geer let fall a ponderous sarcasm about somebody's bringing-up. But Eade had gone back to his quiet ways, and made no reply.

There was little or no talk after this; and presently it happened that a maid coming to the men from the house, her aspect pale and solemn, delivered as her message, that Mr. Krehl desired to speak to the new gardener.

"Me?" said Eade; and the look in his face was more than Geer liked or could fathom.

"Yes — you," the girl said. "And you 're to go to him up the Dark Stair."

"What?" Geer exclaimed. "He don't know nothing about the Dark Stair. He 's never been there in his life!"

"I 've told what I was bid," the maid said. "He 's to go up the Dark Stair. That 's my orders." She scrutinised the new gardener as one who should say, "Him before me, for choice."

"I 'll go," Eade said.

"And Mrs. Wimpress says you 're to go at once. It was her that fetched the message from the north wing, and she says there 's something Mr. Krehl wants you to do for him. So you 're to go at once."

"I 'll go," Eade said again.

The girl lingered: getting close to Eade, "If I was you, I 'd count seven five times, and spit on the first step," she whispered; then went back to the house.

Eade seemed in no hurry about going.

He wheeled a barrowful of waste out on to the rubbish heap under the trees; Geer perceiving how ill he did it, as though he had but got out of a drunken bed. He came back; wheeled another barrowful, saying never a word to Geer, nor Geer to him. It was plain to see he was perplexed, and Geer read a certain crafty secretiveness in his manner.

At last, in a careless fashion, as if he were merely stopping work for breakfast,

he left the celery trenches and walked leisurely towards the Dark Stair. Geer, eyeing him covertly, saw him put down his head and force his way through the undergrowths.

V

RICHARD EADE, on going up the Dark Stair, found the door wide open. He stepped into the north wing.

Krehl was there — some twelve paces down the corridor, standing motionless, his back to the wall. A window was before him: he seemed purposely to have stationed himself there so that the light should fall full upon him.

Every line in his face was visible; the earthy-coloured skin under the thin fine hair of his beard; the yellowish streaks and blotches on the whites of his staring eyes.

Eade's boots being clogged with soil made his footfall noiseless. He carried his cap in his hand, and approached diffidently, shamefacedly: Krehl watching his every movement.

When he was come within a man's length of Krehl, the shepherd stood still, and the two men looked at each other for a moment in silence.

"You sent for me, sir."

Krehl made no reply; not a hair-breadth did his body move; had he been fastened to the wall he could not have stood more rigid.

"You remember me, sir?"

But Krehl had nothing to say.

"It was me that led you back to Bir, sir, that night of the storm."

Eade paused; his brows lowered in a kind of frown.

"My mother's dead. You saw her in her chair, where she died. It was me that lifted the Bible off her lap."

Eade fell silent again. Krehl also stood dumb, arraigned by conscience at the bar of scrutiny. Some elemental emotion awoke in Eade.

"It was the night of Lord Bir's death . . . "

Krehl's chest sank; his body momentarily relaxed its tension. But he drew a deep breath, and his posture became upright again and firm. Yet there was that about him as of body and soul parting.

"You gave mother a sovereign. She put it among her funeral money, where I found it under the mattress."

Eade's voice was stronger, his manner more aggressive.

"I made you a cup of cocoa — if you 'll remember."

He shuffled his feet, leaving scraps of soil on the floor.

"I gave you my old cap . . ."

And now Krehl lifted up his hands as though to ward off a blow.

"Who are you?" he cried.

"Richard Eade, that was the shepherd —"

"I don't know you! I have never seen you till now! —"

And having shouted out this, Krehl

turned his back on Eade and walked rapidly down the corridor.

When the new man returned to the celery trenches, "Well," said Geer, "what did he want?"

"Nothing much," Eade replied, and fell to work.

VI

WIMPRESS, taking a homely supper to the red room, and finding Krehl absorbed in his secret drugs, set the tray on a chair, because of there being no place for it on the table, where the phials and things were. Krehl had been boiling some stuff over a spirit-lamp. Wimpress, standing apart, began to unburden her mind.

"I do wish, sir, you would let me have this room cleaned up, especially if you and my lady are bent on staying here — though I 'm sure, sir, it would be so much nicer for you both to go and live in a better part of the house."

She had almost given up addressing Lady Bir personally.

"I 've not the same strength I had forty years ago," she continued, in a tone of

respectful protest; "and what with one thing and another, I come over with such a trembling and faintness, I 'm forced often to wait for my breath while coming up those long stairs."

But Krehl paid no heed to her complaint.

"To me, sir, it 's a constant wonder you should deny yourselves comforts proper to your station in life, when you have them at your very door, instead of which you go on living here like hermits, and I 'm driven to deceitful ways I never thought of till now."

Krehl just glanced at her.

"Now, there 's that cosy bedroom I 've got ready along the corridor, never slept in, though you promised me you would — and I 've never known you to break your promises as easy as you do now, sir."

He gave her another look.

"If you was n't full-grown, both of you," said Wimpress with some spirit, "and able to know what 's good and bad

for yourselves, I 'd take you there myself this very night — I would — and make you say your prayers and go to bed. What you want — both of you — is a long sound sleep, then hours in the fresh air, even if you do no more than sit in a sunny corner, which is a magical cure for low spirits and frightening the maggots out of the brain. And the least you can do, sir, if you 've fixed your minds on being always here among these suffocating drugs, is to consent for me to bring up one of the maids and have the room made fit for decent eyes to see. You could sit in the bedroom I 've prepared, if you like, while it was being done."

"That 's a long speech, Wimpress," Krehl said.

"But it 's most serious, sir."

"Yes, you must think so, I suppose. To-morrow, Wimpress," he said.

"You 'll let the room be tidied up then, sir?"

"To-morrow," he repeated.

"To-morrow, Wimpress," Lady Bir said.

"Well, that 's a load off my mind. And now, sir," said Wimpress coaxingly, "the cleaning-up being settled on, what 's to be done with all these horrible smelling things you 're constantly mixing and mixing?"

"You see, Wimpress —" Krehl began, but did not go on; smiled to himself, and holding up a phial concentrated his attention upon it.

Wimpress saw nothing but a syrupy liquid of a greenish hue.

"Have you a knowledge of chemicals, sir?"

He appeared not to hear the question. But Lady Bir heard and answered, explaining that Mr. Krehl was a man of science, master of the occult forces of nature, and had learned great wisdom in his Eastern travels. Wimpress picked out the little she could believe, letting the rest slip through the sieve of charity.

"I do not suppose you understand," Lady Bir said. "You are a plain woman, and we must remain incomprehensible to you."

"It don't seem wise, my lady," Wimpress replied, "to make ourselves a bewilderment to our fellow-creatures. I expect them that do will end by making themselves a bewilderment to themselves."

"That is just what we are, Wimpress," Krehl said.

"Then, sir, in my humble judgment it's the most dreadful thing I've heard of."

"What is?" Lady Bir asked.

"Don't trouble, Kate," Krehl said. "Wimpress is only looking for a chance of throwing the Bible at us again."

"I do know," Wimpress said solemnly, "it's the book that knocks down a good many worries. I speak as one that is grateful."

"Grateful for what, Wimpress?" he asked.

"For help and quiet; for the happy smiling feeling that comes upon my heart in my darkest hour, when in fourteenth John it says, I will never leave you comfortless, and in that day you shall know—"

Krehl, setting the phial on the table, turned to her in a kind of reverence, and it seemed a long while that he stood looking at the simple old woman. Then, stepping close to her, he put his hands under her elbows, and mournfully shook his head.

"I envy you," he said, his voice scarce audible.

VII

"WHAT does she say, Lewis?" Lady Bir cried. "Wimpress, you are spying upon us again!"

"No, indeed, my lady."

"Oh, I know well enough what you think," Lady Bir said. "I know what has been in your mind about me ever since we returned to Bir. You have judged me harshly, and made my life a burden to me by setting yourself up as my accuser! You are much to blame, Wimpress. But we have done nothing wrong! Lewis, tell her that we have done nothing wrong!"

"You need n't wait, Wimpress," Krehl said.

"I was only wanting instructions, sir, about all these messy things when we be-

gin to tidy up — what to do with them. I wish you'd be willing for me to throw them on the midden."

"You can make a clean sweep of everything — to-morrow," he said.

Lady Bir having fallen back on the sofa and shut her eyes, the housekeeper approached the table cautiously.

"What is it you are making these experiments for, sir?"

"Oh, we have passed the experimental stage, Wimpress."

He held up a large flat-sided bottle, nearly full of a sluggish green liquid.

"Aha!" he exclaimed in blunted sinister rapture, and placed the bottle in the lamplight.

"When the stuff is made do you pour it all in one bottle, sir?"

He nodded.

"It is like the coloured pots in a chemist's shop," Wimpress said. "What do you say it is called, sir?"

"The Deliverer, Wimpress."

There was a queer pucker across his brows. He glanced at Lady Bir, who was now watching and listening, her lips apart, her eyes entranced.

"The ingredients are all old," Krehl added; "old as nature herself. But the Deliverer is new as regards its operation."

He went on, in a horrible vanity, to explain the thing to Wimpress.

"You see that green bowl on the table."

"The bowl you are always trying to steal!" Lady Bir interpolated.

"Well, if I were to obstruct all the avenues of ventilation in the room, and then pour this liquid into that bowl and set fire to it — See."

He took out the stopper, let fall a couple of drops on to the lid of a tin box, and applied a light. Instantly a green flame sprang up, and with it a pungent deadly odour. Wimpress, as the drops fell, had moved away, remembering the fate of little Annetta's rabbit. But now

in excitement she stepped forward and flicked at the flame with her apron, putting it out. Then she went to the door and threw it open.

"It's most shocking and dangerous," she said, "to have such things in the house! I do believe in another minute I should have been senseless."

"The dose was not strong enough for that," Krehl assured her. "But if I were to empty all the contents of this bottle into the bowl, and set it alight, and you were to enter the room a few minutes later, what do you suppose would happen, Wimpress?"

"I should find you both dead!"

"Yes — we should be dead, certainly. But you would not have time to see us, because you would yourself become unconscious the moment you entered the room."

"And would I come to again, sir?"

"No chance of that, Wimpress. You would not even be able to call for help.

You would simply swoon exquisitely out of life."

He sighed; and Lady Bir sighed.

"God be merciful to us," Wimpress muttered to herself.

"But you would feel no pain," Lady Bir cried, — "no pain at all. Tell her that, Lewis!"

"Absolutely none," Krehl said.

"Oh, Wimpress, Wimpress, to swoon out of life without pain!"

And the old woman answered: "Humbly speaking, my lady, I pray I may have a clear and calm mind when my time comes, for it would be my wish to look up in God's face when He was calling me home."

"God's face —" Lady Bir murmured.

And Krehl said, "What is that? —" And Lady Bir uttered a low note of moaning; and Wimpress stood white and shrunken, overcome by pity and fear.

As the housekeeper went out into the corridor, pulling the door to with a

shaking hand, Krehl bade her good-night.

"Good-night, sir," Wimpress faltered from the corridor. "But I may come up to see if you want anything, before going to bed. I am anxious you should sleep in the bedroom I have got ready."

"There 's no need for you to come again," Krehl said.

"No need, Wimpress," Lady Bir repeated; "we shall not want you again. Good-night."

"Good-night, my lady."

The door being shut, Krehl crossed the room and stood before it.

"Good-night — good-bye," he said. "We are not ungrateful, faithful Wimpress. You have done what you could for us. And to-morrow you may have your way with the red room."

VIII

AND on this austere night, in the abysmal dead hour of it, Lady Bir awoke in bed, in a room which was at first strange to her. She called out and beat her hands on the counterpane, like a woman being suffocated, as she woke.

Two candles burned on a dressing-table (one on either side of a looking-glass) at the foot of the bed, and Krehl stood there, before the glass. He wore a gray wrapper, and his back was toward the bed. Lady Bir saw his face in the glass: his reflected eyes looked into hers. He had undone the wrapper at the neck, leaving his throat bare. An open razor lay on the table.

She murmured his name, and he turning to her, held his hand to his throat, as though in concealment.

"Lewis — you have made up your mind!"

"Yes!" He grasped the ironwork at the foot of the bed. "This is the last night, Kate."

"But you said there would be no blood, Lewis!"

"We have been standing long enough on the threshold," he said.

She raised herself in the bed and began to crawl, as it seemed on all fours, towards him, as if compelled by some irresistible fascination.

"Lewis, you must not leave me. I cannot live alone!"

She stopped in a huddled posture to gaze upon him, and he had never appeared so wonderful in her eyes, so miraculous in his wisdom and power.

"I had a doubt of you, Kate. But now I am sure of you, and we must go together. We shall be as one to the end."

"We are as one, Lewis," she breathed, and fell back on the pillows, clasping her

hands to her throat. "You said there would be no pain, Lewis. Oh, I have so prayed that it might come upon us without pain! Lewis, if we could only sleep — sleep — and not wake again, and all this end in sleep, as you have said."

"That is what will happen, Kate. I have told you, and you have always trusted me. And now this is the one thing that remains for us to do. We are our own judges, and to-night we shall complete ourselves!"

"But where are we, Lewis?" she asked, in stony hopelessness. "I cannot remember this place."

"Wimpress," he answered, "brought us here."

"Then it was Wimpress who prayed? I thought it might have been my mother's voice . . . She made me say something . . . But we bade her good-night, Lewis."

"She came back. You were angry with her for coming."

"Oh, I am so sorry. She has been so good to us. Dear, dear Wimpress! I do not remember being angry with her. But where is the red room, Lewis?"

"Just along the corridor."

"Is he there, do you think? Oh, how still the night is — and my heart — Lewis, I think my heart has stopped beating."

Krehl came round to the side of the bed.

"We must be resolute, Kate," he said.

And she answered faintingly, "Yes, we must be resolute. But how dead the night is, Lewis. And there was a great storm, I remember, that night you came back to offer your life for mine." She raised herself on her elbows, and gazed toward the door. "But now that he has come back, and will never leave us —" She panted and moaned; then slid out of bed and went to the door. "Lewis, he is coming. Do you hear? — that is his step in the corridor. He is not sober. He may have the revolver!"

She locked the door, and withdrawing the key, stood listening.

"We shall elude him this time, Kate."

"He is walking to and fro — always doing that — "

"But we shall give him the slip, Kate! The victory is ours; we have conquered all along! But," he added, "if you will not come I shall go alone. This must be the last night!"

He went to her at the door.

"All the bitterness is past, Kate. I call you to witness, I have no fear; I am absolute master of myself."

He remained silent, posing before the mirror of his mind.

"Let me have the key of this door," he said with authority.

"Where are you going, Lewis?"

"To the red room."

As she gave him the key, she began to sink at his feet.

"Kate, Kate — "

He held her up and kissed her hands and her hair.

"You have always admired my hair, Lewis."

"And now more than ever," he said.

He led her to the bed, and she fell upon it. He kissed her hair again, and bound her in his arms.

"Now is the hour of our deliverance!"

This he said from the door, having unlocked and opened it.

"I shall soon return, Kate."

He left the room.

When he came back she was kneeling beside the bed. Her eyes were tearless. He raised her, and she made no resistance.

They went together into the corridor, and moved along to the red room. The man's left arm was across the woman's shoulders.

In his right hand he held a candle; and as they advanced the light went higher up — high above their heads, like a note of triumph.

Just as they got to the door of the red room the woman's body writhed horribly; seemed to contract and shrivel up; she fell through the man's arm on to the floor. Her brow struck the door; her head fell forward on her bosom; she uttered a remote moaning sound.

As Krehl stooped to raise her, the light went out, and in the same instant Lady Bir became unconscious.

But Krehl dragged her up into his arms; then he flung open the door, and a green glare illumined the corridor. Then the door was shut from within, and darkness fell again upon the corridor, and the Great Silence.

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